

STANION PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION POLICY

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Document Information

Master Document: The electronic version of this document is the master. Printed copies may not contain the latest changes and should not be relied upon. The master document is published on the Stanion Parish Council (SPC) website.

Purpose: The purpose of this Policy is to provide governance for communication, engagement and consultation activities and outline the procedures for SPC staff and councillors to follow when dealing with such matters.

Distribution: this Policy will be made available to all SPC councillors and SPC staff via the SPC website.

Implementation: This Policy will be implemented following consideration and adoption by the full Council.

Review: This document will be reviewed three years after its adoption, unless there are changes in legislation, or recommended best practice guidelines, in which case, it will be reviewed earlier, to comply with the statutory or recommended changes.

EIA Requirement: An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and no adverse impact has been identified.

Financial Implications: This Policy has no financial implications for SPC.

Procedure Statement

This Policy is a formal, strategic level document, which provides a statement of intent explaining how SPC will comply with the legislation and any related directives of its subject matter.

This is a mandatory document and does not allow for variations of practice. It is relevant to all members of SPC and staff employed by SPC. Non-compliance with this procedure may result in formal complaints being registered and/or disciplinary action.

This procedure provides a corporate framework on which communication, engagement and consultation matters are to be dealt with. It will be reviewed by a nominated councillor every three years unless there are changes in the legislation, directives, or recommended best practice guidelines that warrant earlier review and amendment. All amendments require the agreement of the full council and for agreement to be formally recorded.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on this Policy.

Duty to Undertake an Equality Impact Assessment

Public sector organisations have a legal duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity between different groups and foster good relations between different groups. Due regard comprises proportionality and relevance.

The EIA Tool

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is a tool to ensure that we don't unwittingly exclude anybody from accessing the services we provide. Undertaking an EIA involves assessing the likely effects of our policies on people according to their 'protected characteristics'.

These are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy
- maternity
- race
- religion and belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

An EIA should be applied to a Policy, Strategy, Plan, Function, Project, Service and Event. EIAs help to identify any inequalities in the provision of services, employment, or procedural practices, and minimise the risk of exposure to claims of discrimination.

Purpose

This purpose of this Policy is to define how communications, engagement and consultation will be undertaken and the responsibilities within the Parish Council regarding such activities.

Scope

The intention of this Policy is to provide guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications, engagement and consultation between members of the Parish Council, the electorate and other relevant stakeholders.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Data Protection Acts

All communications received and responded to by the Parish Council may be subject to release under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and information deemed to be “personal information” is subject to release under the Data Protection Act 1998 and 2018, or in the course of legal proceedings.

Information held by someone (*a member or employee of the Parish Council*) on behalf of a Parish Council, will satisfy the definition in Section 3 (2)(b) of the FOIA 2000 Act, and constitute information held by a Parish Council to which an individual is entitled to request access to under the FOIA 2000 Act. Therefore, information that relates to the business of the Parish Council, held in the personal email accounts of members of the Parish Council, or employees of the Parish Council, is caught under the FOIA 2000 Act.

If official business of the Parish Council is held in councillors personal email accounts, and it contains personal data, it may also come within the scope of a Subject Access Request under the DPA 1998. And, if councillor personal email accounts contain personal data that relates to campaigning for election, it also may come within the scope of a Subject Access Request to the member, under the DPA 1998.

Information held in the personal email accounts of councillors and employees of the Parish Council that does not relate to the business of the parish Council, will not be subject to the DPA or FOIA Acts.

Communication - Key Principles

When writing any communication, it is wise to assume that it may be required to be disclosed to a Court or Tribunal, or to the Information Commissioner.

The communications should be relevant and concise and should not express personal opinion, and the communication should only be shared with those that have an express need to know.

Extra care should be taken when sending communications by email, to ensure that the correct address is used and only those entitled to receive the transmission do so.

Emails are permanent. Even when deleted, they can often be retrieved and may be disclosable to a Court or to the Information Commissioner.

Internal emails that are marked “Private” or “Confidential” might also be required to be disclosed, when it is lawful to do so under the above Acts, or as part of a disclosure exercise in the course of legal proceedings.

When drafting a communication, check that the information cannot be construed as offensive or discriminatory, negative, or derogatory.

All communications generated by a councillor or an employee of the Parish Council are required to be copied to the Clerk's email account, so that they may be placed in the official files and retained as a permanent record of communications.

Responsibilities and Accountability

All councillors and employees of the Parish Council are responsible for ensuring compliance with this Policy.

The Clerk is responsible for ensuring that all correspondence received is filed in the official files and is done so in accordance with the file naming and filing protocols.

Parish Council Correspondence

The Clerk is the point of contact for correspondence sent to the Parish Council and they are responsible for dealing with, or assigning the correspondence to a councillor, to deal with and may provide information on which to draft a response.

The Clerk is responsible for maintaining the electronic hard copy files and for filing hard copy correspondence in the secure cabinet in the Parish Council office.

No councillor is permitted to act as sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Parish Council and they do not have a right to access confidential information or documentation unless they can demonstrate a need-to-know. If there is any doubt as to who may see or hold confidential information, the decision of the Clerk is final.

Official correspondence is to be sent by the Clerk, in the name of the Parish Council, on Parish Council headed paper. It is to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity as Clerk to the Parish Council, and that the correspondence has been authorised by the Parish Council.

Where correspondence is copied to another person, the addressee is to be made aware that a copy of the correspondence is being sent to the other party.

Agendas for All Meetings and Working Groups

Agendas are to be clear and concise. They are to contain sufficient information to enable councillors and the public to understand the business to be transacted. And are to show what items are being considered and what decisions will be taken at the meeting.

Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential for pre-determination. Whilst it is acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and

information, councillors should ensure that they retain an open mind, and avoid comments that might give the impression of having reached a conclusion.

Items for information on an agenda should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Where the Clerk or a councillor wishes fellow councillors to receive matters “for information only”, that information is to be circulated via the Clerk and reported as having been distributed at the next scheduled meeting of the full Council.

Correspondence from the Clerk marked “Confidential” is to be treated as such and not disclosed to anyone outside the distribution list for that communication.

Correspondence with External Bodies

All correspondence received by a councillor from a member of the public or any other external body, by any means, is to be passed to the Clerk, and their guidance sought on action to be taken or an appropriate response.

If approached directly, a councillor should not make any promises, other than to say that they will ensure that matter is brought to the attention of the Parish Council. The Clerk should be advised of all incidents of direct personal contact.

The Clerk will ensure that any response provided to questions raised, or information requested, reflects the decisions and policies of the Parish Council.

All correspondence to external bodies is required to be made via the official Parish Council Clerk email address, or on Parish Council headed paper if it is required to be responded to in hard copy.

Parish Councillors are not permitted to communicate directly with companies or individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All communications with these bodies are to be undertaken by the Clerk. The Clerk is responsible for ensuring that a formal record of all such communications is retained on file.

Requests for copies of information or documents from any source, are to be dealt with by the Clerk, who will identify whether the information is already available via the Publication Scheme, and if not, consider whether there is a need to add the requested information to one of the Classes of Information in the Publication Scheme.

Communication with Parish Council Employees

Councillors must not give directions to an employee of the Parish Council, unless they are authorised by the Parish Council to do so.

No councillor may give instructions to the Clerk which are inconsistent with or conflict with Parish Council decisions or are contrary to policy or are unlawful.

Given that the Clerk/RFO works on a part-time basis, councillors should not expect an instant response to any emails sent to those employees.

Contact with the Media

The Clerk is the point of contact for the media. The Chairman of the Parish Council is responsible for drafting all press releases in consultation with the Clerk, and the Clerk is responsible for transmitting the Press Release and filing a copy of it in the official files.

The purpose of a Press Release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information, or to explain the Parish Council's position on a particular matter.

Proactive press releases may be issued where it is deemed appropriate to promote a decision or the work of the Parish Council.

Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued in response to a specific question, or as a rebuttal to an article already published.

Approaches from the media should be notified to the Clerk in the first instance and councillors should refrain from providing any comment to the member of the Press. And, any councillor who is asked for comment by the Press, should make it clear that any views they express are "personal" and not necessarily those of the Parish Council.

If a councillor writes to the media to express their own opinion on Parish Council matters, they must make it clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Parish Council policy.

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the Press and members of the public have been excluded, are not to be divulged under any circumstances.

Engagement and Consultation Strategy

The aims of our Engagement and Consultation Strategy are:

- To improve the way in which we engage with our parishioners
- To ensure that parishioners are kept fully informed
- To ensure they are consulted on key issues, and
- To ensure that they have been offered the opportunity to be involved in key decisions affecting the Parish

Community engagement is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions that affect them and the community overall.

It provides the opportunity for residents of the Parish to express their views on matters that are important to them. It also enables the Parish Council to consult with and inform the parishioners about what services it provides, and explain how, when faced with limited

financial resources, it prioritises those services, and it enables the Parish Council to tell them how we are performing against our Plan and targets.

Objectives

The key objectives of the Engagement and Consultation Policy are to:

- Provide information
- Seek opinion
- Encourage effective local community engagement

To enable:

- The disbursement of accurate information about the work of the Parish Council
- Identify what is important to the parishioners, and consider and prioritise those needs
- Participation in the development of services and understand how the Precept is spent

General Principles

The key aspects of engagement include:

- Clear, honest and regular communication of important information, which is accessible to everyone in the Parish
- Providing accurate information that explains the significance of issues faced by the Parish, what the options are and how we intend to deal with the issues
- Listening, understanding, and acting on information provided to us, and
- Responding to all concerns raised by parishioners

How we will Engage

- We will hold an annual Parish Meeting to enable parishioners to question how the Parish Council are working to improve the Parish. The aim is to encourage two-way communication between parishioners and the Parish Council
- We will provide opportunities for parishioners to have their say in key decisions affecting the Parish. *All meetings of the Parish Council are open to the public and Press, and information is published on the website and the Village notice boards*
- We will provide regular opportunities for face-to-face discussion with a Councillor by means of monthly surgeries, held in the Parish Council office in the Village Hall
- We will provide a broader range of information on the new Parish Council website
- We will encourage residents to write to us with their concerns and publish their communications and our responses on the new website
- We will actively promote our plans on the website and through the new hard copy seasonal Newsletter
- We will develop Facebook and Twitter accounts to reach those who regularly use those communication tools
- We will encourage parishioners to provide us with suggestions for improvements to Parish services by means of a “drop box” located outside the Parish Council office

- We will ensure that all meeting dates are advertised well in advance
- We will make our policies and procedures available through the new website
- We will expand the range of information available through our Publication Scheme
- We will be receptive to requests from residents, and we will actively share all information received from parishioners and service providers via the new website
- We will continue to represent Stanion Parish Council through consultations and attendance at meetings of outside bodies, to ensure the needs of our Parish are made known

Communication with the Local Community & Stakeholders

We are committed to improving our community engagement by:

Undertaking all of the above activities and striving to improve our relationships with community groups and outside agencies that can assist us in our endeavours, including developing measures to harness the views and opinions of people who are sometime missed out of community engagement activities.

We will be proactive and willing to consider all means of getting information to the local community and in trying new ways of increasing contributions from them.

We will consider holding a public meeting, or some other form of public consultation, on any controversial issue that affects the Parish as a whole.

We will make available via the new website, the results of any public consultation or survey that affects the Parish.

We will endeavour to develop a Stanion Neighbourhood Plan with the support and engagement of the local community.

We will investigate the possibility of joint venture working and shared services with local or County groups and organisations that may be able to assist us in achieving our aims, and we will publish the results of those ventures on our new website.

We will promote our achievements and actively encourage parishioners to join us as Members of the Parish Council.

We will promote the elections to be held in 2020, the importance of the democratic process, and the value of being a Parish Councillor.

We will seek volunteers and promote the value of volunteers to the Parish.

Review

This policy will be reviewed by Stanion Parish Council every three years.

Signed: Signed on original Date: 11.3.19