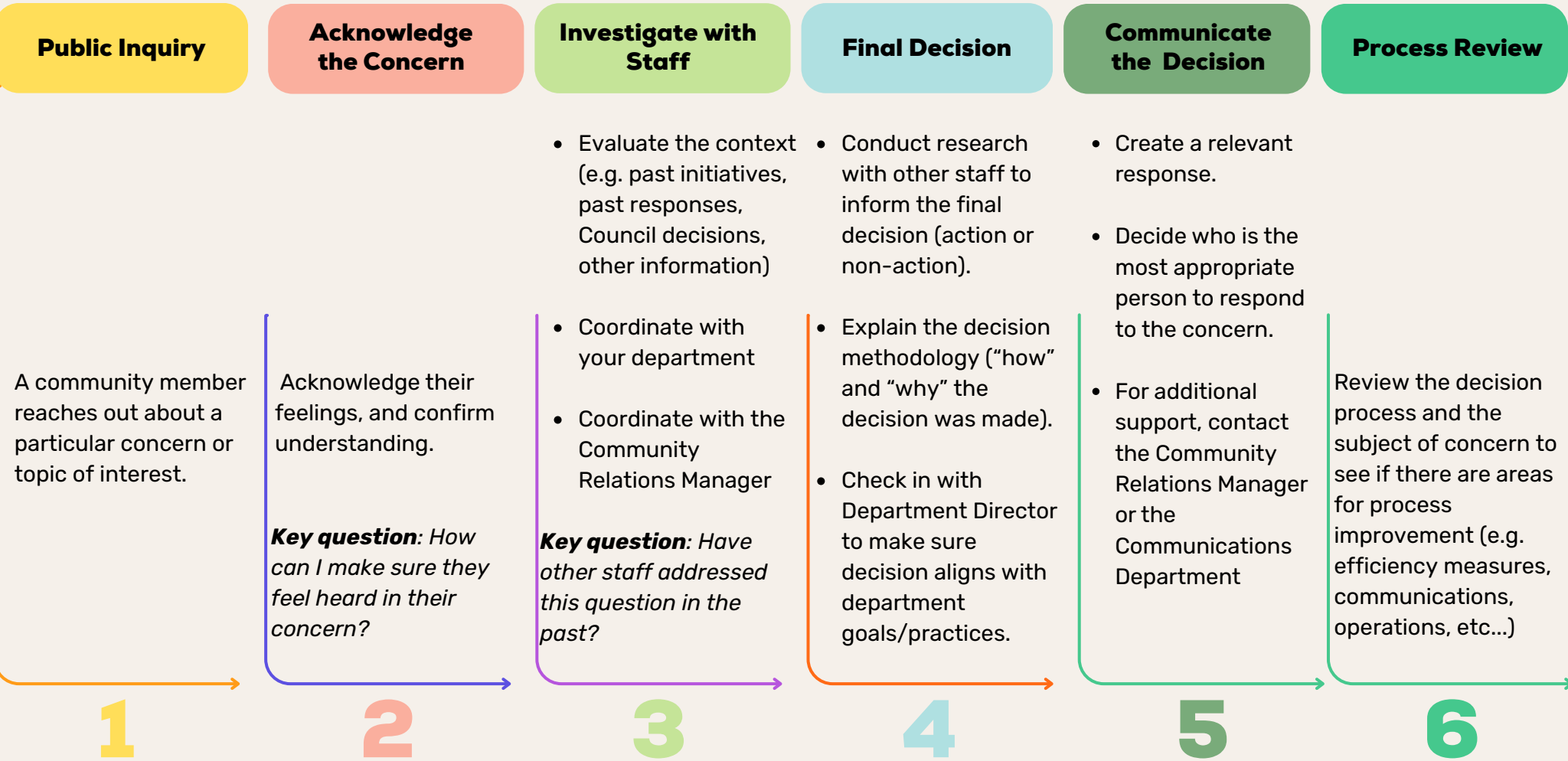
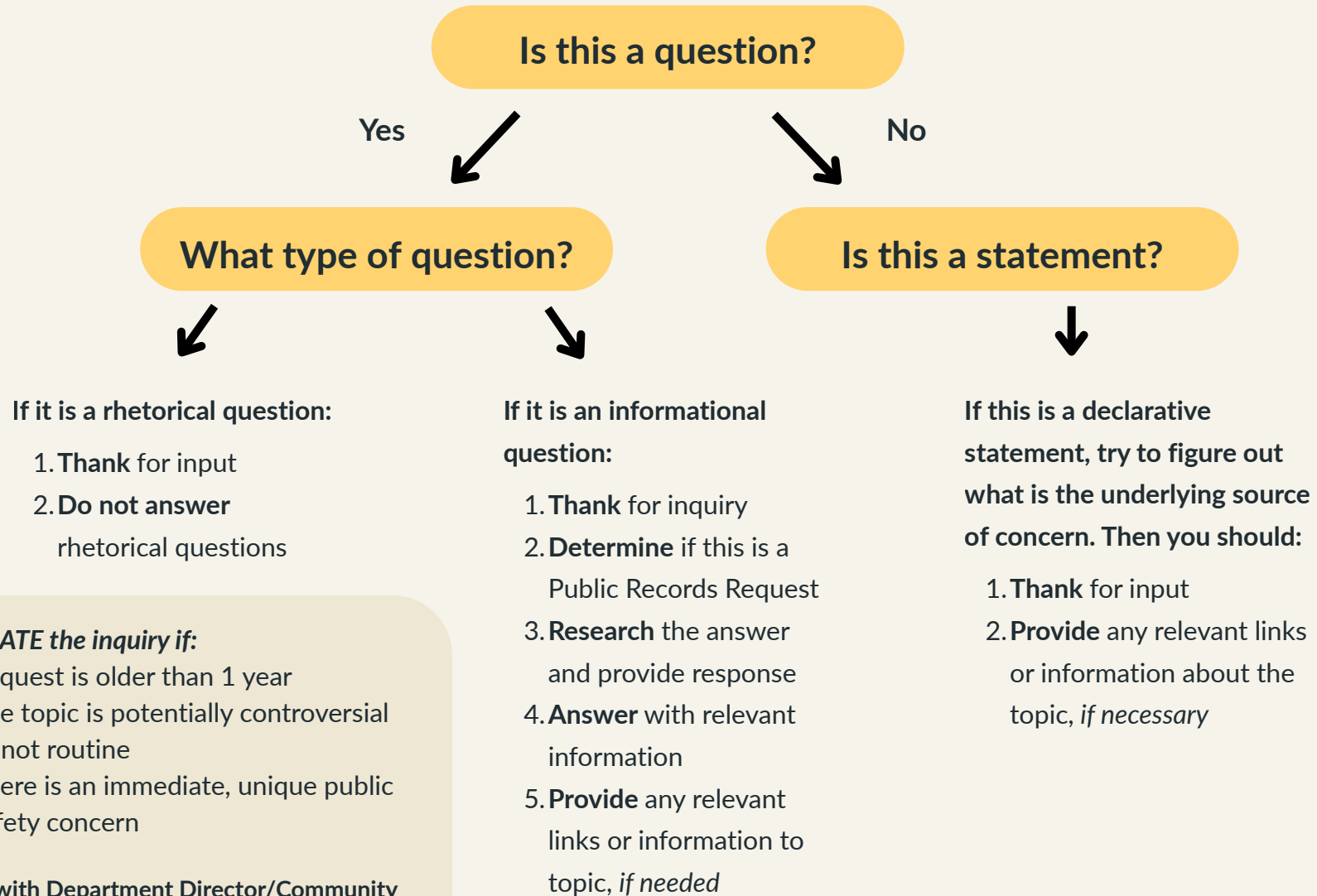


Community Response Guide



Stage 1: Public Inquiry - Initial Response Plan



ESCALATE the inquiry if:

- Request is older than 1 year
- The topic is potentially controversial or not routine
- There is an immediate, unique public safety concern

Speak with Department Director/Community Relations/Communications Departments first!

Stage 1: Public Inquiry - Response Method

Phone Call or Email Reply?



CALL

- If the information can be conveyed over the phone with more empathy
- If the information is too confusing or has lots of nuance...
- If building a relationship is key for future communications
- Sometimes people want to be listened to and tell their story. LISTEN.



EMAIL

- If the acknowledgment requires attached documentation, links, and/or bulleted information
- If the information that needs to be shared is concise and clear to understand
- If a phone call will potentially be contentious
- If a written record of the response is needed and/or useful

Tips

- Address people by the name in their email signature.
- If there are additional questions that need a deeper dive after an email has been sent, schedule a phone call or virtual meeting. This gives you an opportunity to get additional clarity on a concern/inquiry.
- If scheduling a virtual meeting, be strategic about who should be at that meeting. (The meeting should last 15 minutes max, unless it is a complex issue with lots of layers.)

Key Questions

- Can I effectively convey my message via email or would a phone call be more effective?
- Will a phone call potentially be contentious?
- Was the email sent directly to me/Town or was the Town only copied on the email? (If the Town is copied only, we may not need to respond. Ex: Town cc'd on email to School Board)

Stage 2: Acknowledge the Concern

Acknowledge the Concern

How can I make sure they feel heard about their concern?



RECOGNIZE what the person is actually asking for.

EMPATHIZE with the person and imagine how you want someone to speak to you, if you had the same request.

ADDRESS all concerns with relevant information regardless of whether the Town can/cannot take action.

Checklist

- Is an apology appropriate?
 - Think about the legal implications of an apology for serious matters
 - For less serious matters (no liability issues), apologize and let them know that the Town is working to enhance our processes and communications.
- Does your response recognize the inconvenience of the concern, if there is one?
- Does your response genuinely show that action is being taken to address the concern or explain why we are not taking action?
- Set **EXPECTATIONS** and **TIMELINE** for additional follow-up, if further information/research is needed. (e.g. I will speak with _____ Dept and follow up with you by the end of next week.)

Stage 3: Investigate with Staff - Town's Authority

Investigate with Staff

Is this within the Town's authority?



YES

ASK relevant department(s) about information on the topic and if we have addressed this topic in the past.

NO

TEMPORARY RESPONSE: "This may or may not be something we can address based on the Town's authority. Let me do some research and check back with you."

RESOURCES: Even if an inquiry is not within the Town's authority, try to provide contacts or resources to the relevant authority agency/entity.

Checklist

- Speak to your colleagues in your department; Contact the Community Relations Manager
- Understand the policy/ overall message about the topic/concern

Key Questions

- What is the Town's authority? (Ordinances, etc.)
- Town's authority vs. Other authorities (NCDOT, Duke Power, etc.)
- Is this a private matter? (Between neighbors, etc.)

Stage 3: Investigate with Staff - History of Topic/Sender

Investigate with Staff

Have we received other inquiries about the same topic in the past?



YES

DETERMINE if the Town has corresponded with the sender in the past.

RESEARCH past messaging and information from the Town about the topic.

- Relevant department
- Community Relations Manager
- Communications Dept.

NO

RESEARCH the topic by speaking with all relevant staff.

- Relevant department
- Community Relations Manager

**If the issue is pressing or potentially controversial, reach out to Community Relations Manager and Communications Department.

Checklist

- Check Town website for topic information
- Check local media websites to see if there are news stories about the topic

Key Questions

- Has this been addressed previously?
- Who has already communicated with this person? Communication Relations, Communications, Department Comms/Admin?
- Has this been sent to the Mayor/Town council inbox recently or in the past?

Stage 4: Make the Final Decision

Final Decision

WHAT is the final decision?



WHY did we make this decision?



HOW did we make this decision?

Considerations: Data, capacity, community input, Town ordinances/guideline considerations, State/Federal laws, Interdepartmental Meetings/Discussions

Checklist

- Consider all of the equity implications/unintended consequences of the decision and other outcomes
- Provide timely updates to sender (If decision or follow up communication will take longer than anticipated.)
- Internally: Define the policy/decision message

Key Questions

- Do you have all the information to best inform your decision?
- Does the final decision address their concerns?
- Is there an opportunity for process improvement?
- What was the decision process?
- Can we “stand” behind our decision/response? (Me, Director, or the Manager’s office)
- Does this decision need to be reviewed by the legal department or elevated to the Town Manager?

Stage 5: Communicate the Decision

Communicating the Decision

Who else needs to know about this decision/information? Who is your audience?

Consult Communications & Engagement Team

Click Here for: [Communications and Engagement Support Form](#)



Specific Neighborhood

- Neighborhood Liaisons
- HOA/Community Listservs

General Public

- “Our Town”
- Engage Chapel Hill
- Doorhangers
- Yard Signs



Town Council

- Weekly Town Manager Updates

Town Staff

- Weekly Town Manager Updates
- Town Intranet/Internal Department Updates

What should the messaging include?

- Decision
- How decision was made
- Why decision was made
- Timeline (if action is necessary)
- Feedback request

Less is more!

Checklist/Key Questions

- Who is the most appropriate person to respond?
- Share details internally so staff is on the “same page”.
- If applicable, offer relevant ways that the town is working to improve processes/communications
- Suggest sign up opportunities for “Our Town”
- Consider the possible individual/community outcomes to the response.
- Does your department have a list of canned responses for certain inquiries?
- Does your department have a system for sharing notes about each of your calls/interactions/emails? Create shared folder.
- Do we need to update digital or printed materials to reflect any process changes based on inquiry/decision?
- Did I “close the loop” and ask the sender for feedback about how we can better communicate with the community or improve process?

Stage 6: Process Review

Town Process Review

Did we make this decision because this is “the way that the Town has always done things”?

YES

NO

IDENTIFY

- What’s working?
- How can we do better?
- What’s not working?
- Why have we always done things this way (past leadership, past staff support/capacity, past processes, etc...)

REVIEW what Town dynamics or operations led to this decision or to the process “weak points” and speak with all relevant staff to determine “How can we do better?”

- Relevant departments
- Community Relations Manager

Checklist/Key Questions

- Did I “close the loop” and ask the sender about process feedback?
- Are there improvements that we can make to the decision process?
- Are there improvements that we can make to our communications processes?
- Are there improvements that we can make to our operations processes?
- Are there technology adjustments that could improve our processes?
- Is there an ordinance that needs to be changed?
- Discuss process improvement ideas with Department Director
- Consult with the Community Relations Manager for potential interdepartmental process improvement opportunities.

Town Resources

Community Relations Manager

- Is it a community member concern and you are unsure who to direct them to about an issue?
- Do they have a non-confidential community concern?
- Have they reached out to a department multiple times or multiple departments several times?

Ombuds

****(If you answer "yes" to 1 or more, below)*

- Have they engaged with Town staff on an issue and aren't satisfied with the resolution?
- Do they want a confidential way to discuss concerns about a Town service or a Town employee?
- Are they looking for assistance or resources not provided by the Town, but aren't sure where to go?

Public Records Requests

Website Form:

<https://www.chapelhillnc.gov/Town-Services/Public-Records/Request-Public-Records>