

Subject: Options for Managing the Council's Accounts – Spreadsheets, Rialtas, and Scribe

1. Introduction

The Parish Council currently manages its finances using spreadsheets. This approach works for many smaller councils, but it can become time-consuming and increase the risk of mistakes as financial responsibilities grow.

This report compares three options for managing the council's accounts:

- Continuing with spreadsheets
- Using Rialtas accounting software
- Moving to Scribe Accounts, a cloud-based system designed for parish councils

The aim is to help councillors decide which system would best support the council's financial management in the future.

2. Option 1 – Spreadsheets

Many parish councils use spreadsheets such as Excel to record income and expenditure. Typical tasks include:

- Recording payments and receipts manually
- Reconciling bank statements
- Preparing financial reports for councillors
- Producing the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR)
- Calculating VAT claims

Advantages

- Very low cost
- Flexible and familiar to most users

Disadvantages

- Higher risk of errors in formulas or data entry
- No clear record of changes made to the accounts
- Time-consuming to prepare reports and year-end returns
- Often relies heavily on one person understanding the system
- Limited security or backup protection

While spreadsheets can work well, they require a lot of manual work and can make financial reporting more difficult.

3. Option 2 – Rialtas

Rialtas is a well-known accounting system used by many parish and town councils.

Advantages

- Designed specifically for local councils
- Structured accounting system with standard financial reports
- Widely used within the sector

Disadvantages

- Usually installed on a single computer rather than fully cloud-based
- Access can be limited if more than one person needs to use the system
- Remote access and collaboration can be more difficult
- There can be additional costs for support, upgrades, or cloud hosting

Cost

Costs vary depending on the package, but typically include:

- An initial licence or setup fee
- Annual support or maintenance charges
- Possible additional costs for cloud hosting

4. Option 3 – Scribe Accounts

Scribe Accounts is a cloud-based accounting system designed specifically for parish and town councils.

The system allows the council to manage finances online through a single secure platform.

Key Features

- Bank reconciliation tools
- Automatic financial reports
- One-click AGAR reports for year-end
- Built-in asset register
- Budget monitoring tools
- VAT returns compatible with Making Tax Digital
- Access for multiple users

Because it is cloud-based, the system can be accessed securely from any device.

Benefits

- Saves time by automating many routine tasks
- Reduces the risk of spreadsheet errors
- Makes it easier to produce reports for councillors
- Provides a full audit trail for financial changes
- Secure cloud storage with automatic backups
- Unlimited training and support

5. Cost Comparison

System	Typical Cost	Notes
Spreadsheets	Very low	More time required to manage accounts
Rialtas	Annual Support for single user - £212 Annual support for second user £210	Alpha Finance Software (one-off costs) - £499 Install and set up Alpha Finance - £289 Training – half day - £300
Scribe	£37 per month, £444 annually	£299 one-off setup fee

Although spreadsheets appear cheapest, they require more manual work and carry a higher risk of errors.

6. Recommendation

After considering the options, as recommendation from the RFO would be to move across to Scribe Accounts for Stoke St Michael Parish Council.

The main reasons are:

- Designed specifically for parish councils
- Easy to use and fully cloud-based
- Saves administrative time
- Improves financial reporting for councillors
- Provides better security and audit records
- Reasonable and predictable cost

While Rialtas is a well-established system, Scribe offers a simpler and more flexible cloud-based approach.

7. Next Steps

If councillors wish to proceed, the following steps would be required:

1. Council approval to adopt Scribe Accounts
2. Arrange system setup and onboarding with Scribe
3. Begin using the system for the accounting period 2026/2027