



BARHAM

PARISH COUNCIL

Communications Policy

1. Introduction and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council regarding communications and provide guidelines.

Barham Parish Council (BPC) articulates and represents the views and needs of the local community. It provides information on important parish matters affecting the community and encourages comment from interested individuals and groups.

The overall aim is to make Council communications a two-way process: to give people the information to understand accurately what BPC does, whilst also enabling BPC to make informed decisions using information received from residents and partners.

It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech or to enforce strict rules and regulations. Rather, it provides guidance on how to ensure efficient and effective communications between council members and with third parties.

By following this policy BPC, its staff and councillors will meet their obligations under the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), the DPA (Data Protection Act), the PERC (Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations) and the FOIA (Freedom of Information Act)

The principles of this policy apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to BPC. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

2. The Importance of Good Communication

Good communications will enable BPC to:

- better understand the needs of the community and develop appropriate strategies and priorities
- raise residents' satisfaction, trust and confidence by communicating about issues, services and opportunities in the parish, the district and county.
- be an effective voice of the community
- maintain and enhance the reputation of BPC
- proactively challenge inaccuracies and misrepresentations that might undermine the brand image or integrity of BPC or the parish

3. Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information

- BPC accounts will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

In order to ensure that all discussions by the Council internally or with the public are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask you to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.

4. Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option, if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know.

5. Who is Communicating?

5.1 Proper Officer

The Proper Officer (the Clerk) has overall responsibility for overseeing all communication with members of the community and outside bodies. 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.

The Clerk is provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

All official correspondence should be sent by the Clerk in the name of the council using council letterheaded paper, making it clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by the parish council.

Where correspondence from the Clerk to a Councillor is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person.

Council letterheaded paper must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views. Council letterheaded paper is used by the Clerk and authorised staff in the day to day running of the Parish Council and its interests.

Members of staff will be required to communicate both verbally and in writing on a regular basis with the community as part of their duties, using the council email address with which they have been provided. It is imperative that staff always handle such communication with courtesy and professionalism.

5.2 Councillors

Elected members will be regularly approached by members of the community as this is part of their role. How enquiries from the public are dealt with by Councillors will reflect on BPC. Enquiries may be in person, by telephone, letter or email.

When in doubt about how to respond to an enquiry, the guidance of the Parish Clerk will be sought.

At no time should councillors make any promises to the public about any matter raised with them other than to say they will investigate the matter. All manner of issues may be raised, many of which may not be relevant to BPC. Depending on the issue, it may be appropriate to deal with the matter in the following ways:

- refer the matter to the Parish Clerk who will then deal with it as appropriate
- request an item on a relevant agenda
- investigate the matter personally, having sought the guidance of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors must ensure that all communication with the public on council related matters reflects the decisions and policies of BPC, regardless of the councillor's individual views on any subject. BPC will agree its statements for release to the press and social media.

All councillors are provided with a council email address which is to be used solely for the purpose of conducting council business.

Council letterheaded paper may be used by the Clerk when preparing communications from any councillor if requested but must only be used to convey information that has been authorised by the parish council and must not be used to convey personal views.

Emails received by the Council's Proper Officer or Members may be disclosed following a request under the Freedom of Information Act or following a subject access request under the Data Protection Act, under the General Data Protection Regulation or in the course of legal proceedings.

5.3 Council Meetings and Councillor Interaction

BPC meets as advertised on the website and noticeboards. Meetings start at 7:30pm. There is time allocated for a public session prior to the formal start of the meeting.

Councillors must ensure that they have read and understand any documents for discussion and come to meetings able to make an informed decision or identify information that is required in order for them to do so.

The use of mobile phones and other internet connected devices by councillors is prohibited during BPC meetings unless permission is granted by the Chairman of the meeting. This is for the avoidance of distraction and to ensure focus. This does not prohibit councillors attending meetings with electronic copies of the agenda, minutes and supporting documents.

The activities of BPC committees and individual Members who represent BPC on community groups are reported back to the council.

The Agenda and Minutes of the meetings are published on the council website following approval at a council meeting.

Councillors who have taken on responsibility for some action which involves written or verbal communications with third parties shall lodge a copy of any such communications with the Clerk.

Guidance on interaction:

- BPC Councillors should always disclose their identity and affiliation to the parish council,
- All media enquiries should be directed to the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- If appropriate, for a specific issue the Chairman may authorise another councillor to make a statement on behalf of BPC.
- All media comment must accurately reflect BPC's position on the topic, as adopted in documents e.g. minutes and policies.
- All decisions of BPC made in an open meeting can be quoted and made available to the media.
- The person responding to the media enquiry should have the necessary facts and understanding and be able speak with some authority, using plain English.
- Councillors should not make 'personal comments' which could damage the reputation of BPC or negatively impact on teamwork or credibility of the council or members of the community.
- Comment on matters which are, or are likely to be, subject to legal proceedings should be subject to advice taken from BPC's Solicitor before any response is made.
- Councillors wishing to make a 'personal statement' to the media must clearly inform the media:
 - that their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of BPC.
 - that other councillors may hold a different view.
 - that the matter may still need to be discussed or resolved by BPC.

6. General Principles

When writing any communication always assume that it may have to be disclosed. Keep the communications relevant and concise. Do not send unnecessary copies or forward messages to others if not strictly necessary.

Always write emails as if they are permanent because even when they have been deleted, they can often still be retrieved and may be disclosable to a court or the Information Commissioner. Internal emails, even if marked private or confidential, might eventually need to be disclosed when it is lawful to do so.

Information in communications may not be confidential but may be sensitive information that needs to be respected.

Always respect the privacy of others.

Do not write anything in communications that might be construed as offensive or discriminatory.

Do not make negative comments about an individual, including members of the public, Members, Officer, or business suppliers.

Use a Parish Council signature so that it is clear in what capacity you are writing.

Copy in (either cc or bcc) any appropriate officer or councillor.

7. Barham Parish Council email

The Clerk to the Council has their own council email address (clerk@BPC?????.org.uk)
The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Tuesday and Wednesday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message should be used for holidays and periods of sickness. All councillors are provided with a parish council email address by the Clerk (name@BPC?????.org.uk) which they must use to receive and send emails relating to Parish Council business.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with residents in relation to their own personal views and if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. **Please note:** *all emails sent to or from a BPC email account become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act. Parish Council email addresses should be used when communicating by email as a councillor.*

These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council. This includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

8. Personal Social Media Accounts SMS and (texting)

Members and the Clerk may not use Personal Social Media Accounts or SMS (Texting) to communicate council business at any time.

9. Responsibilities and Accountabilities

Officers and Councillors alike are responsible for ensuring compliance with this and related policies.

10. Procedure

10.1 Agenda Items for Council, Committees, Sub-Committees and Working Groups

- Agendas 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.
- Communications between councillors regarding agenda items should have regard to the potential issue of pre-determination. While it is perfectly acceptable to exchange thoughts, ideas and information, councillors should ensure they retain an open mind and avoid comments that might give the perception of having reached a conclusion.
- Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda.
- Where the Clerk or a Councillor wishes fellow Councillors to receive matters for "information only", this information will be circulated via the Clerk.
- Correspondence from the Clerk marked "Confidential" must be treated as such and not be disclosed to anyone.

10.2 Correspondence with external parties

- All correspondence for the Parish Council should be addressed to the Clerk. Councillors should forward any correspondence received to the Clerk.

- No individual Parish Councillor should communicate directly with companies/individuals with which the Parish Council has a contractual relationship. All enquiries should be through the Clerk.
- If a member of the public requests a copy of any correspondence from a councillor, the matter should be referred to the Clerk who will consider whether the correspondence is in the public domain or subject to an FOIA request.

11. Communications with Parish Council Staff

Councillors must not give instructions to any member of staff, unless authorised to do so (for example, three or more Councillors sitting as a committee or sub- committee with appropriate delegated powers from the council).

No individual Councillor, regardless of whether or not they are the Chair of the council, the Chair of a committee or other meeting, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee which are inconsistent or conflict with council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.

Telephone calls should be appropriate to the work of the parish council.

E-mails: Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; 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; Councillors should Acknowledge their e-mails when requested to do so.

Meetings with the Clerk: Wherever possible an appointment should be made; councillors should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business and not driven by a personal agenda.

12. Contact with the Media

The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. Approaches from the media should be referred to Parish Clerk. Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.

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 council's position on a particular issue. The Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.

Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or 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. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.

Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, parish councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that any views they express are personal and not necessarily those of the Council.

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.

Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Parish Clerk unless they have been specifically approved by Council. If Members choose to express

their own opinions on Council matters, they must make clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Council policy.

Members and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

13. Other Methods of Communication

13.1 Online Presence

Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on the web is permanent.

BPC's website is to be regularly updated and kept up-to-date.

It is important to ensure that links to the website are provided from other key partners, especially Mid Suffolk District Council.

It is important to ensure that the BPC website has links to other key partners especially Mid Suffolk District Council, Suffolk County Council, other local parishes and community groups.

BPC does not currently have a social media presence.

13.2 Noticeboards

The village noticeboards will be kept updated to ensure that members of the community who are less active online are kept aware of key information.

The noticeboards are intended generally for Parish Council specific information although consideration will be given to using the space for notices pertaining to activities of interest or other important information.

13.3 Publications

The Parish Council will publish information in the monthly "In Touch" magazine which is delivered to all houses in the area.

13.4 Parish Council Logo

The Parish Council's logo is used as a brand to identify BPC and the parish as a whole. The logo is owned by BPC and can only be used with the Parish Council's express permission.