

Barrington Parish Council – Communications Guidance

Preface

This Communications Guidance Document sets out Barrington Parish Council’s aspirations for future communications both internally and with our local community and our key stakeholders. It should be treated as a “best practice” guidance document ideally to be followed wherever practical, whilst subject to the constraints of time and resources.

It draws upon, but does not replace, the Barrington Parish Council Standing Orders and other Policy, Procedural and Protocol Documents, which always take precedence, in order to inform the reader. These documents can be found on the Barrington Village Website.

As a responsible and responsive council, we are conscious that we communicate according to our own preferences but that the recipient receives the communication according to theirs. We are also conscious of the burden that modern communications place upon us all, and the need to be as efficient and effective as possible so as to reduce that burden.

Verbal and non-verbal communications may carry different messages and we hope to improve the way we communicate, keep up to date with developments in technology, and follow recognised best practice in all our communications.

1. THE PARISH COUNCIL'S AIMS, STYLE, METHODS AND APPROACH OF COMMUNICATION

As a Parish Council, we communicate externally to our Parishioners, suppliers, tradespeople, advisers, etc. and internally between ourselves. This Communications Guidance addresses all of these.

1.1 The Council's Aim is to communicate clearly and effectively both to the public and our key stakeholders and within the Council

We will seek to:

- use an agreed Council style
- keep sentences short and paragraphs to 3 or 4 sentences
- use active not passive verbs and sentences
- keep to plain English using everyday words, avoiding jargon and acronyms
- give the Clerk's contact details, e-mail address and website details where appropriate
- use the correct name of the Council (Barrington Parish Council)
- use standard templates for letters, reports and official publications where available / appropriate

1.2 Communications with the Press and Public

- Minutes & Freedom of Information Responses – *to provide transparency and accessibility*
- Press Releases – *to inform and reach out to the wider community*
- The Council Notice Board – *to provide a "backstop" in accordance with historic good practice*
- Website and Social Media – *the website to provide updated information, access to Council material, and to open up an avenue for engagement; Social Media (e.g. "Facebook" or "Spotted" to be used with care and discretion – not to engage in debate or comment, but to reach out quickly when information or situations demand*
- Public Meetings and Information Sessions – *our traditional method of engaging with the community by standing up and being accountable before residents for the work and decisions of the Council and listening to their views and expectations*
- Leaflets and Newsletters – *for maintaining a regular link with the community to provide information and invite engagement*

1.3 Councillors

- Correspondence with external parties – *to ensure that the Clerk is the main contact for the Barrington Parish Council and is included in all external Council correspondence*
- Communications between Councillors and Council Staff - *to facilitate the smooth running of the Council*

1.4 General Data Protection Act Regulations (GDPR)

- Council undertakes training and follows procedures to ensure compliance with the 2018 GDPR requirements.
- Compliance with GDPR should never be used as an excuse for reducing the transparency, openness and accountability of the work of Council, Councillors, and Council Staff.

2. MEETINGS OF THE COUNCIL AND COMMITTEES

- Agenda – *to inform the public of the business under discussion ...*
- Public Involvement – *enables members of the public to attend a meeting of interest to them*
- Procedural Items – *maintain a standard approach to ensure good governance*

- Business items – *maintaining efficiency and transparency in the business of Council*
- Reports – *provide background information / analysis for consideration by Council*
- Minutes – *advise the public of issues discussed, action points, and decisions taken*

2.1 Agenda

- Best practice is for a draft Agenda to be prepared between the Clerk and the Chairperson and discussed with relevant Council / Committee members as appropriate prior to finalisation. Time may not always allow for this wider pre-consultation, but it should be considered normal courtesy to ensure no items of interest are omitted.
- The Agenda should be clear and concise.
- It should contain sufficient information for the public to understand what matters are being considered and what decisions are to be taken at a meeting.
- Items for information should be kept to a minimum on an agenda. They may contain supporting information such as letters, minutes from other bodies, and so on.
- Items for decisions or recommendations may have supporting information such as reports, applications, and letters. These will be published and circulated with the Agenda if possible.
- Where possible, relevant documentation will be made available to the public, for example on the website, unless it is a Part II paper (exempt).
- Agenda for meetings of the Council and its Committees will be circulated and made available to the public a minimum of 3 clear working days before the day of the meeting. Current best practice is distribution 5 or 7 clear working days before the meeting. A clear day does not include the day of the notice or the day of the meeting and excludes weekends and bank holidays.
- Spare copies of the Agenda should be available for the public attending meetings.
- Agenda items will be numbered consecutively for ease of reference.

2.1.1 Public Involvement

- There is no mechanism for the public to place matters directly onto the Agenda. However, the Council has arrangements for public questions, comments or representations in the “Have Your Say” item. This is limited to three minutes per person (unless agreed otherwise by the Chairperson). The matter may be formally referred to a committee, be placed on the Agenda of the next meeting, responded to by the Clerk, or simply noted.
- There is no opportunity for discussion at a meeting on matters for which there has been no prior notice on the Agenda.

2.1.2 Procedural Items

- The Agenda for meetings can be divided between procedural items and business items. Procedural items normally include:
 - Chair’s announcements – for example: welcome and formal civic announcements, not matters that are or should be on the Agenda for debate and decision
 - Apologies for absence
 - Minutes – An item to enable the Chair to authorise the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record. This item is purely for recording corrections and amendments for accuracy purposes, not for raising matters arising from the minutes. See section on Minutes below
 - Declarations of interests and requests for dispensations. The Agenda should include standard items in accordance with the latest regulations or guidance concerning Councillor’s interests

- Subject to the Council’s Standing Orders, custom or practice, there may be other procedural items, by way of receiving information that are not to be the subject of discussion or debate at the meeting. For example:
- Appointment of members to committees - It may be necessary to change the membership of a committee during the course of a year in the event of a resignation or other reason
- Members’ questions to the Chair - Standing Orders include provision for Members of the Council or a Committee to put questions to the Chair. The rules should specify that questions must relate to the functions of the Council or Committee as appropriate, that notice of questions is given a specified number of days before the meeting and that the Agenda item be time limited.

2.1.3 Agenda - Business Items

- These will be determined by the Council’s activities, or the terms of reference of a Committee / Working Group and its functions.
- Some items will recur from previous meetings, and in such cases, it is good practice to make this clear.
- Each matter should be given a clear heading as to what the Agenda item is about and a brief indication of what the meeting is going to consider, and the likely time required.
- More complicated items may require a written report (see below). If there are reports or supporting information this must be clearly identified on the Agenda so that Councillors and the public know to refer to them. The Agenda item should refer to the report by its title and other documentation by some suitable reference.
- A draft Agenda item report should be prepared in advance of the publication/despatch date and shared with the Chair. The Chair has responsibility for the proper conduct of the meeting and needs to be involved in planning the meeting.
- The order of business items is important. For example, it might be appropriate to include controversial items, or items for which there is likely to be public interest and attendance, early in the Agenda. Items where the press and public are likely to be excluded should be put at the end.

2.1.4 Reports

- Those making a decision must have the full relevant information. Council’s decisions can be set aside by a court if due regard has not been given to relevant information or irrelevant considerations have been applied.
- The best way of providing this is through a report with accompanying documentation, as appropriate.
- Reports may be prepared by the Clerk or other officer, or by Councillors themselves – especially when reporting back to the Council or Committee on an event attended or research done at the Council’s request or as a result of a Working Party or Committee meeting action. They should contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision.
- Reports and information will generally be circulated at the same time as the Agenda and made available to the public, unless they include confidential matters that would justify the exclusion of the press and public at the meeting. This enhances the transparency of the Council’s decision making and improves local knowledge of its activities.
- Wherever practical, reports should show the Agenda item number clearly at the top for identification.

2.1.5 Minutes

- The minutes of a Council or Committee meeting are a public record of the decisions of the Council / Committee. The minutes can be produced in court and other judicial processes as evidence of decisions of the Council. They confirm the resolutions made, and form part of the Council archives which must be preserved.

2.1.5.1 Minutes should be:

- accurate, precise and concise
- self-contained (that is: complete in themselves and understandable without reference to other documents)
- clear (so that there is no doubt about the decision made)

2.1.5.2 Minutes should not:

- be a verbatim record of the meeting
- document opinions or views that were expressed at the meeting unless specifically requested to do so
- fail to include matters of relevance to a proper understanding of the decisions of Council / a Committee

2.1.6 Guidance on Minute Writing

- Use plain English using full sentences and appropriate grammar
- Use the house style with a clear heading containing the status of the meeting, the place and date
- Include the time the meeting starts and ends and any adjournments
- Start with an alphabetical list of the Councillors present at the meeting
- Minutes should be numbered consecutively for ease of reference
- Each minute to contain a heading clearly indicating what the minute is about, a narrative or text, as appropriate - that briefly summarises what took place, and the decision. For many routine items, for example, commenting on planning applications, a narrative will not be necessary
- Minutes should include reference to any written reports submitted
- It is not necessary to refer to individual speakers by name unless this is significant or so requested.
- It may be appropriate to record the fact that an applicant or an objector addressed the Council or committee on a planning application or that the Clerk, other Officer or an Officer of the district or County Council reported on a matter
- Abbreviations should be avoided, and acronyms only used after having written the title in full at the first mention
- The decision should be separately highlighted for ease of identification and words used to show that it is a decision.
- The wording of the decision should be included in full.
- The order of the minutes will follow the order of the Agenda.
- Declarations of interest must be carefully recorded in the minutes, naming the Councillor and clearly indicating which item the interest referred to, whether the interest is a personal interest or a personal and prejudicial interest, giving the nature of the interest and whether the member left the meeting during the discussion and decision on the item
- Where Standing Orders provide for the submission by notice of formal written motions to a Council meeting, it is appropriate to record the names of the Councillors proposing and seconding the motion in the minutes

- Where Standing Orders make provision for a recorded vote to be taken, or when a Councillor asks for votes to be recorded in the minutes, the minutes should record the names of Councillors voting for and against the matter or the individual Councillor's vote accordingly
- Where Standing Orders provide for a special procedure (other than routine arrangements) to be followed at a meeting it is generally appropriate to include a reference in the minutes to the procedure being followed as evidence to that effect
- Decisions to exclude the press and public should be fully recorded in the minutes, making it absolutely clear to which matter or part of it the exclusion applied
- Resolutions that are confidential or for some other special reason are not in the public interest to disclose must be recorded in the minutes, without undermining or disclosing the confidential or other sensitive information. For example, the resolution "option 2 in confidential report dated 10 July 2014 reference N PC 3 approved" provides clarity as to the resolution that was made but does not reveal confidential information

2.1.6.1 Process

- Minutes will be written up as soon as possible so that the minute taker's memory is fresh and interpretation of the information available from handwritten notes of the meeting is easier
- Minutes in draft form should therefore record that fact clearly (at the top and bottom) to the effect: "Minutes subject to approval at the next meeting" or by using a "draft" watermark
- The draft minutes will be circulated, within ten clear working days after the meeting, to all Councillors (or where the minutes relate to a meeting of a committee or sub-committee to the members of the committee or sub-committee). This gives Councillors the chance to comment upon minor accuracy issues *before* formal publication of the draft minutes
- The draft minutes will be considered at the next meeting for acceptance and signing by the Chair as a true record. If, at the meeting, changes are made to the minutes by the Council or committee before acceptance and signing, the wording changes should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting that agreed the changes and the original minutes must be amended to reflect the changes. The copy signed by the Chair will contain the alterations, recorded in longhand, with the changes signed and dated
- The signed minutes will be retained in the Council's archives and form the public record.
Note - The Decisions made at a meeting have immediate effect. They are not subject to the preparation of draft minutes or the approval of minutes of that meeting at a later meeting.
- The minutes will be published (on the website and notice boards), as per the Council's publication schemes.

3. COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE PRESS AND WITH THE PUBLIC

3.1 Minutes and Freedom of Information

- Draft minutes are a qualified exemption under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, as they are classed as 'information intended for future publication'.
- If Councillors receive a complaint from a member of the public, this should be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure, or via a Council agenda item.

3.2 Press Releases

- The Clerk will clear all press releases, or comments to the media, with the Chairman of the Council or the Chair of the relevant Committee.
- Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, if asked for comment by the press, Councillors should make it clear that it is a personal view and ask that it be clearly reported as their personal view.

- The press and public are invited to all full Council, and to Committee meetings except Staffing (Personnel) and Finance Committees, and receive an Agenda through the website and public noticeboards.

3.3 The Council Notice Board

- The Council may identify locations for community noticeboards, seek the relevant permissions and install noticeboards to promote the Councils activities
- The noticeboards when in place, will be updated regularly and will display:
 - The full title of the Council
 - The name, address, telephone number and email address of the Clerk;
 - The Council's website address
 - A list of Members of the Council with contact details
 - Venues, dates and times of meetings for the year
 - Agenda for forthcoming meetings
 - If practicable, minutes of meetings or a summary of recent decisions
 - Where the minutes, the code of conduct and other public documents may be inspected

3.4 Website and Social Media

- All Agenda, reports and Minutes may be placed on a dedicated website, with appropriate archive facilities where possible.
- The Web site will be maintained up to date on a regular basis
- Social Media may be used to provide updates regarding Parish activity and to alert parishioners to things of immediate importance.
- Unless a Councillor has been authorised by the Council to engage with social media on a particular issue, Councillors should make it clear that they are expressing a personal view and not that of the Council.

3.5 Meetings

- An effective Parish Council engages with a wide variety of stakeholders through regular informal meetings and sometimes more formally. Such meetings are actively encouraged.
- Reports of such meetings, whether held by Councillors or by the Clerk, or both should be made to the Council through the Clerk and the Chair. The Clerk or the Chair may request formal recording and reporting of such meetings to Council.

3.6 Public Meetings

- Council may call Public Meetings of various types at its discretion. Best practice requires that such meetings are properly notified and recorded.
- Council encourages transparency and accountability throughout and is always open to suggestions for holding public meetings; drop-in sessions; information sessions; facilitated meetings and so on.

3.7 Leaflets and Newsletters

- Council has traditionally communicated with the parish through occasional leaflets and providing information via the Village's newsletter. These outlets will continue to be an important source of providing information to the Parish.

3.8 Technology

- Council is conscious of the need to consider the use of new technologies to increase the accessibility and transparency of its work. For example, live streaming of Council Meetings and use of similar web-based technologies for improved communication will be considered subject to cost and practicality considerations.

4. COUNCILLORS and COUNCIL STAFF

4.1 Correspondence with External Parties

- Written correspondence (letters or e-mails) from Councillors to other parties on Council matters should be sent through the Clerk, unless agreed otherwise. The Clerk will make clear that it is written in their official capacity and the Council has authorised it.
- All official correspondence by letter will be from the Parish Council Clerk in the name of the Council using Council letter headed paper.
- As an exception, should a Councillor have reason to send outgoing correspondence relating to the Council or a Councillor's role within it, it needs to be made clear that it is written in their official capacity and has been authorised by Barrington Parish Council. A copy should be sent to the Clerk, and the writer should note on the correspondence, e.g. "copy to the Clerk" so that the recipient is aware that the Clerk has been advised.
- Where letters to the Parish Council are received by a Councillor they must be passed to the Clerk as quickly as possible.
- Responses to correspondence received will be given with ten working days of receipt, where possible, if not an acknowledgement will be sent, and the letter will be discussed at the next Parish Council meeting.
- Where correspondence is copied to another person, the addressee should be made aware that a copy is being forwarded to that other person (for example: copy to XX).
- Councillors must use their judgement when communicating with others in a personal capacity as to how the correspondence will be received. If there is any risk of the recipient considering that the Councillor is speaking on behalf of the Council, then it Councillor's responsibility to make it clear that they are not.
- No individual Councillor should be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of Barrington Parish Council, a committee, sub-committee or working party. In particular, Councillors do not have a right to obtain confidential information/documentation unless they can demonstrate a "need to know".

4.2 Communications Between Councillors and Council Staff

- The Chair gives direction and provides instructions to the Clerk or other Officers to take action on behalf of the Chair or Council and its Committees as required.
- Councillors may only give instructions to the Clerk or other Officers when 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, Chair or otherwise, may give instructions to the Clerk or to another employee inconsistent or conflicting with Council decisions or arrangements for delegated power.
- Telephone calls and all other communications during working hours paid for by Council should be appropriate to the work of the Council.

4.3 Email Correspondence

- E-mails:
 - Every effort should be made to reduce the volume of e-mail traffic among members of Council.
 - Emails should indicate whether a Response is required, and if so, by when; or if they are for information purposes.
 - The use of “Reply” and “Reply to all” should be considered carefully every time. Do all the recipients need to know your reply or only the sender?
 - Instant replies should not be expected from the Chair, the Clerk, or Councillors; If an urgent response is required then reasons for urgency should be given.
 - General information to Councillors should normally be directed to the Clerk and only cc’d to the Councillors if a matter requires urgent consideration.
 - E-mails from Councillors on Council matters to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.
 - E-mails from the Clerk on Council matters to external parties should be copied to the Chair, or when appropriate, to Councillors, and follow General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) guidance.
 - A log / archive of all Clerk’s e-mail correspondence on Council matters shall be maintained as per other types of external correspondence.
 - Councillors and the Clerk should acknowledge receipt of e-mails when requested to do so
 - Officers and Councillors are not required to send read receipt acknowledgements of emails
 - When replying to e-mails it is each Councillor’s responsibility to check the recipient list to ensure that Council business is not being sent to those not authorised to receive it.
 - Blind copies should never be sent as this runs counter to the Council’s commitment to openness and transparency and agreed GDPR guidance.

4.4 Meetings with the Chair, Clerk (or other officers), and Councillors:

- Wherever possible an appointment should be made.
- Meetings should be relevant to the work of that particular councillor or officer.
- Councillors and the Clerk (or other officers) should be clear that the matter is legitimate council business; that it is not a matter being more properly addressed by other councillors; or driven by personal or political agenda.
- A Council Diary shall be maintained that is accessible to all and which sets out key meeting dates of Council, Committees and Working Groups etc. Additional dates such as Training; Workshops; and Meetings to which Councillors are invited to attend should also be indicated.
- Scheduling of additional meetings for Councillors shall be done preferably through an on-line system such as “Doodle” that enables all Councillors to see potential dates and availability of all, for both convenience and transparency.
- As much notice as possible shall be provided for Councillors when such additional meetings are required.

Barrington Parish Council Adopted October 2018

Reviewed 16th March 2021