

# BRINGTON AND MOLESWORTH PARISH COUNCIL

## **SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

**AS ADOPTED BY Brington and Molesworth Parish Council  
on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

## Social Media Policy

The aim of this Policy is to set out a Code of Practice is to provide guidance to Brington and Molesworth Parish Councillors and staff in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- ☐ Parish Council Website
- ☐ Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- ☐ Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- ☐ YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ Bloggs and discussion forums
- ☐ Parish Council Emails

The principles of the Policy apply to Parish Councillors and Council staff. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration. The policy does not seek to regulate Councillors and staff in their private capacity.

No direct costs will be incurred by implementing it. It will require a volunteer to update and monitor the social media sites.

The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Brington and Molesworth Parish Council Facebook Page and other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication. Therefore, existing means of communication should continue with social media being an additional option.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What you write on the web is permanent.

In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their online presence for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters; see further notes below.

1. The Council will appoint a nominated Councillor or Councillors as moderator(s). They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content ensuring it complies with the Social Media Policy. The moderator and Clerk will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libel nature. Such post will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e., Facebook) and also the Clerk.

2. The Council will appoint a nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Parish Council Website.

The social media may be used to

- ☐ Post Agendas, minutes and dates of meetings
  - ☐ Advertise events and activities.
  - ☐ Good news stories
  - ☐ Vacancies
  - ☐ Sharing information from partners i.e., Police, Library and Health etc.
  - ☐ Announcing new information.
  - ☐ Post or Share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g., Schools, sports clubs and community groups.
  - ☐ Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other councillors.
- Facebook will be used to support the website information above.  
Emails will be used to distribute information of Council business.

Individual Parish Councillors are responsible for what they post. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used for Council business. Councillors are strongly advised to have separate Council and personal email addresses.

### **Code of Practice**

Guidance when using social media (including email):

3. All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place.
4. When participating in any online communication;
  - a. Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
  - b. Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council. Never make false or misleading statements.
  - c. Parish Councillors and staff should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All Parish Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council or bring the Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
  - d. Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, not capital letters, or write in red or bold to emphasis points.
  - e. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
  - f. Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
  - g. Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
  - h. Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
5. Respect the privacy of other Councillors, staff and residents.
6. Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations; see below regarding libel and copyright.

7. Residents, Councillors and staff should note that not all communication requires a response.
  - a. There will not be immediate responses to communications as they may be discussed by the Parish Council and all responses will be agreed by the Parish Council.
  - b. The Parish Clerk and the moderators will be responsible for all final published responses.
  - c. If a matter needs further consideration, it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. Again, the poster shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case.
  - d. If the moderator feels unable to answer a post for example of a contentious nature this shall be referred to the Parish Clerk. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Parish Clerk directly.
  - e. Some communication from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Parish Council meeting. When this is necessary the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.
8. Councillors, staff or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk of the Council. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.
9. At no time should information discussed in confidence be used or discussed on Social Media sites.
10. The Policy will be reviewed annually.

## **Additional background information (IDeA) 2010**

### **Libel**

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation, they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

### **Copyright**

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

### **Data Protection**

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

### **Bias and pre-determination**

Section 25 (2) of the Localism Act 2011 states that a member or co-opted member of a local authority cannot be taken to have had or to appear do anything that directly or indirectly indicates that they have had a closed mind when making decisions of the relevant authority otherwise the validity of the decision may be called into question.

## **Obscene material**

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

## **Electoral periods**

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents)

## **The Council's legal position**

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

## **The Members' Code of Conduct**

Councillors and staff can have 'blurred identities, you may have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor or an employee and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion.

There is the need to get social media accounts/ profiles clear, to be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing the Parish Council.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the Council, for example blogging as a Councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a Councillor; and that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line.

For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a Councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most Councillors are using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role.

Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their Council, local police service or Councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you.

Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way. Bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance.

Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake; perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

- **Avoid the trolls** - A troll is a person posts inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic messages in an online community with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.

## References

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) 2010. Connected councillors a guide to using social media to support local leadership. IDeA March 2010

'Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' LGA

Connected Councillors Social Media Handbook, Cheshire East Council

Jaffe PR Social Media Policy Template. November 7, 2

## Appendix 1



### ADVICE NOTE: A Guide to Facebook

#### ADVICE NOTE: A Guide to Facebook Introduction

Social media offers a range of opportunities for local councils to use the internet to communicate and engage with local residents. However, to ensure the most is made of these opportunities, and to ensure the risks are appropriately managed, it is best to put some thought and planning into what you choose to do with social media, and why.

So just how can local councils make use of this technology?

Firstly, we can improve our communications. Lots of people now use online methods to communicate with their friends and families, as well as with businesses and other organisations. If councils want people to see what they are saying, then these new channels need to be used. It could be as simple as using Twitter to provide quick updates of the work the Council is doing, or what is being discussed at a public meeting. Alternatively, we can use different media to tell the same story – photographs are a great way of documenting online what is happening in an area and the web is a great way of publishing them to large audiences.

Second, it can be used to increase participation in the work we do. Not everybody has time to attend meetings, but that doesn't mean they don't want to contribute. By giving people the opportunity to get involved online, we might be able to encourage them to engage even further in future.

This early, online stage could be as simple as giving views on a local issue on a Facebook page, responding to an online survey, or giving feedback on a draft document through a digital form.

Third, using this technology can help us change the culture of our councils, to be more open, transparent and collaborative. Once we start taking even baby steps into the digital world, the possibilities start to become apparent. Increasing numbers of councillors are saving their councils money by using their own devices to work paperlessly, using their iPads for example to read reports and other papers.

Other developing technologies have yet to make an impact on our sector, but they cannot be far away. The transparency agenda has seen councils in other tiers of government sharing their data, whether about council spending or other information. This data is then used by businesses, charities and communities to build apps and develop plans to improve their services.

The so-called 'internet of things', where everyday objects, not just computers, have access to the network, is another fast-developing area. The concept of 'smart cities' is relatively well known now, but what might a smart village look like, when every house, community and business in a parish are connected by a high-speed internet connection?

Local councils ought to be considering these issues to ensure they are well placed to make the most of new technological developments, so that they may continue to provide an effective and relevant service to their communities.

Having said all of this, the basics are still important. For example, I would never suggest a council *only* uses digital communication methods. A balance is required, otherwise people will be left out. However, using digital is scalable and cost effective, so the more of it we can use, the better.

Also, it's important to get the online foundations right before we start using potentially more exciting channels such as social media. This means ensuring we have an effective website in

place and are using tools such as email well – including having an email newsletter that people can subscribe to.

This advice note sets out some of the ways that social media can be used by local councils, followed by specific advice about some of the key tools and platforms that exist – what they are and how they might be used.

The advice note has been put together by Dave Briggs, who regularly speaks at SLCC events and conferences. If you have a query for Dave, you can email him using [dave@worksmarthq.com](mailto:dave@worksmarthq.com) or read his latest tips on his blog at <http://da.vebrig.gs/>.

### **A Quick Guide to Facebook**

Facebook is a social network - it allows you to create a profile, connect with friends, send messages, share photos and play games. It's the biggest network of its type in the world, with hundreds of millions of active users.

Organisations as well as individuals can have a presence in Facebook too, by creating 'pages'. These can also be used for individuals as a persona other than their personal one. So, if you wanted a presence in Facebook for work, other than the one you use to talk to your real friends, making a page for yourself might be a good idea!

If you want to create a page for your organisation, you can do so even if you aren't already logged in with your personal profile. Just click the link on the home page that says "Create a Page for a celebrity, band or business" - don't worry if you are none of those things, there are other options! Make sure you get the naming and branding of your page right, so people will want to engage with it. If your organisation is part of a sector that is considered a bit stuffy or dull, it might be a good idea not to emphasise it. Pick a name for your page so that people won't feel ashamed to be associated with it!

As a social network, Facebook offers you various ways to get in touch with people. You can send people email-like messages, or chat live with them in a manner similar to instant messaging. Alternatively, you can join and create groups along interest or location lines and invite people in to talk to and share information with.

Facebook has a simple way for you to share links with people