

BLEADON PARISH COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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1. Introduction

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors and staff an overview of Social Media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officer and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

2. Definition of Social Media

Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content. They include social networking sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction.

Social media has the following characteristics:

- Covers a wide variety of formats including text video photographs audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of device PCs phones and tablets (eg iPad)
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information
- Provides one-to-one one-to-many and many-to-many communications
- Lets communication take place in real time or intermittently

Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter Facebook Wikipedia YouTube Pinterest, Snip.It LinkedIn and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

3. Pitfalls

Whilst these tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people there are some pitfalls to be aware of:

- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. You do not even need to register in many cases to view the content. Registering is only required should you wish to participate and post to the site.
- Groups on specific themes can set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately and it is all too easy to respond instantaneously which can result in unintentionally inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience. Friends of Friends may not be our Friends.

It is also very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

4. Purpose of the Policy

Social media provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience instantaneously on a range of subjects relating to its activities, providing updates, news, information and re-tweeting relevant information from other sources. It also provides an opportunity to communicate with the younger age group, the business community and hopefully the harder to reach groups.

The Council will make use of approved social media tools to quickly disseminate information but carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks as stated above. The Council do not have active social media accounts, but they may be introduced in the future.

5. Aims and Objectives

Social media can be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this Policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
- That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected
- That communication by use of social media is effective timely appropriate useful engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (eg website, quarterly magazine linking facebook to twitter account etc)

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure. Refer to the Council's Communications Policy.

6. Policy Statement

It is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to Officers and Members.

This policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the council or its business nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Bleadon Parish Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy. Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act.
- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes you must not imply you are speaking for the council. Avoid use of the council e-mail address logos or other council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible you should include a standard disclaimer, such as: "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions".
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other council policies when using social media. For example you should be careful not to breach council confidentiality and proprietary information policies.
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- Use of the Parish Council's accounts must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion, particularly when used by a Councillor. If unsure, say nothing.

Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork exaggeration and colourful language.

7. Responsibilities

The Parish Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of any Social Media channels agreed by the Council. Councillors officially appointed by the Council may assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information during busy times or when the Clerk is on leave. However all must ensure they follow this policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Clerk is permitted to operate a Twitter account but must adhere to this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

8. Guidance for Councillors - social media and meetings

The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of Bleadon issues and the use of social media can help with this especially immediately after the conclusion of official council meetings. Twitter is a quick and direct way of feeding concise updates about a meeting - these principles for members are aimed at the use of Twitter but are equally applicable to other forms of social media.

9. Facebook Strategy

Social networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society. The most popular social networks are web-based, commercial, and not purposely designed for town council use. They include sites like Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga. For individuals, social networking sites provide tremendous opportunities for staying in touch with friends and family. For the Council the sites provide a modern alternative means to communicate with residents of the town.

Facebook for example offers a rich platform allowing you to share unlimited content including images and videos.

Example activity:

- Share articles / blog posts / expertise
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Create surveys to encourage participation from visitors
- Upload images and videos
- Generic news – what’s happening in the area

One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “friend” others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Care should be exercised when accepting invitations to friend others within personal social networking sites. Friends will gain access to the Council’s network of contacts on the site.

Good practice guidelines for the use of Facebook by the Council as a body or Councillors as individuals are:

- As a Parish Council we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise council policies or personnel.
- Set your profile’s security and privacy settings carefully. At a minimum all privacy settings should be set to “only friends”. “Friends of friends” and “Networks and Friends” open the content to a large group of unknown people.
- All activity on the Council facebook page must follow the Council’s agreed statement of purpose and outcomes for the use of the networking tool.
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission.

- Pay close attention to the site's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site.
- Only add statements approved by either the Full Council a committee or the Parish Clerk.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory obscene proprietary or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration colourful language guesswork obscenity copyrighted materials legal conclusions and derogatory remarks or characterisations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Bleadon Parish Council at risk.
- To reduce security risks do not install any external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click leading to a fake login page.
- If you find information on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law.

Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

10. Twitter Strategy

Twitter is a 'microblogging' platform which allows users to post short messages and converse with other users. Unlike email or text messaging, these conversations take place in the open and engage audiences in discussions about services, products and issues– connecting a vast amount of likeminded people in an often targeted and purposeful way.

Example activity:

- Share relevant articles / blog posts / expertise
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Link to Facebook content / surveys / pictures / videos
- Follow and participate in discussions with other related tweeters
- Comment on tweets and re-tweet other posts to build community
- Offer relevant Q&A sessions
- Provide information and news updates on Council activities
- Disseminate information in emergency situations

Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts subject to following the guidelines.

Key questions when tweeting are:

- What do the followers really want to know?
- When do they need to know it?
- Why is the information you're sharing relevant?
- Am I the most appropriate person to be responding to queries/commenting on tweets if it is a Council-related matter?

Keep the content valuable!

Negative comments should only be responded to with factual information and on-line arguments must always be avoided.

11. Other Social Media

Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media they wish to but must abide by this policy at all times when so doing.
