

# BRACEBRIDGE HEATH PARISH COUNCIL

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## Policy for online interaction

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## **1 Purpose and scope**

- 1.1 Bracebridge Heath Parish Council chooses to use online accounts to communicate on a range of subjects relating to its activities, providing updates, information and news. It also allows the sharing of relevant posts from other sources which have a direct relevance to residents and members of the community.
- 1.2 This policy aims to cover use of online communication including all forms of social media and social networking sites which include but are not limited to
  - Email
  - Parish Council Website
  - Social media – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs and discussion forums
- 1.3 This policy applies to all Members, Officers, employees and volunteers associated with Bracebridge Heath Parish Council, known as role holders.
- 1.4 This policy includes standards and guidelines for role holders to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

## **2 How social media will be used by the Council**

- 2.1 Social media may be used for:
  - Engagement with the community for the promotion of Council based services, events, decisions and actions
  - Supporting local democracy
  - Distribution of council notices and official business
  - Distribution of other relevant local information, events and services including that of other local authorities and higher tier councils
  - Gathering public and resident views on matters relating to the council's business
- 2.2 Social media accounts are not an official form of communication and should not be relied upon to raise concerns, make complaints or make requests for information. The appropriate channel to do this is in writing by email or letter. Whilst every effort will be made to answer queries arising from social media, accounts will not necessarily be checked on a daily basis.
- 2.3 Councillors and staff should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response.
- 2.4 All representatives of the Parish Council may contribute to Parish Council social media accounts and are able to set up their own social media accounts. They are responsible for all content which they generate or which they choose to forward or repost.
- 2.5 It is recognised that representatives of the Parish Council may wish to keep their personal life and official capacities separate. This is achieved by:
  - Using the council owned email address (@bracebridgeheath-pc.gov.uk domain) for all council business
  - Setting up distinct accounts or 'pages' within specific platforms or applications.

## **3 Code of Practice**

- 3.1 When using social media, role holders must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative. Role holders should not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face-to-face.

3.2 When participating in online communication, social media users should:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, accurate, informative and balanced
- Respect the privacy of other role holders and residents
- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos (posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence).
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Check the spelling and grammar of their content

3.3 Social media users should

**Observe Data Protection legislation**

- Personal data of others should not be posted on social media, including home addresses and telephone numbers
- Reference to customers, partners or suppliers should not be cited without their prior written consent. Personal or sensitive information must be handled in line with the Parish Council's data protection policies.
- Councillors and staff must not publish or report on meetings which are private or confidential.

**Protect the council's reputation**

- Personal opinions should not be presented as that of Bracebridge Heath Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of communicates online personally, and not in their respective role, they must not claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council i.e. they should not include web links to official Council websites, Council logos, Council email addresses or any other Council identification as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council.
- Role holders should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must not bring the council into disrepute through content posted in any capacity.
- Role holders must not make false or misleading statements.

**Be aware of political bias**

- Role holders must not post personal or political content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council or post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks.
- Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute pre-disposition, predetermination or bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings in line with the council's adopted code of conduct.
- Political blogs cannot be linked from the Parish Council's website or social media accounts. The Parish Council cannot promote the online accounts of any candidate or political party during an election period or at any other time. The Parish Council is not permitted to publish material which "in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party" (Local Government Act 1986).
- Parish Council online accounts and websites will not allow electioneering during an election period or other period of sensitivity a period or explicit or implicit support for political parties during election periods or at any other time

**Be aware of appropriate use guidelines**

- Users should not make derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory or offensive comments about any person including council staff, councillors, the council or about the people, businesses and agencies the council works with and serves. This includes online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment.

- Language or comments that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site
- Users should not engage in personal attacks, online fights, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others.
- Users should not conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence.
- Elected Members should be aware that their position may be viewed differently to other members of the community when contributing to 'local' social media. Although Councillors may choose to operate their own accounts, they should be mindful of their corporate responsibility as a Member of Bracebridge Heath Parish Council. The distinction between a personal view and a position as a Councillor may not be obvious to other members of the community. Comments on any form of media which may directly or indirectly criticise the actions/ views of employees, other Councillors or the Parish Council as a corporate body should be considered carefully before posting.

### **Remain safe online**

- Councillors must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the internet and should not publish information which could leave them vulnerable. Any Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Parish Clerk, the social media administrators and/or the police.

3.4 Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Council role holders or residents should report this to administrators directly or to the parish clerk. Matters or breaches may be referred to the Full Council as required.

## **4 Managing social media accounts**

4.1 When participating in online communication, Bracebridge Heath Parish Council expects that all users will observe the code of practice outlined at section 3 above. This includes content posted by members of the public and all role holders of the council.

4.2 Administrators for the Council's social media accounts will be appointed by the council (by resolution) at each Annual Meeting of the Council in May.

4.3 The Clerk and Deputy Clerk to Council are responsible for maintaining the council's official website.

4.4 Administrators of such accounts will be responsible for monitoring content to ensure it complies with this policy. Administrators will have authority to

- remove any posts or comments from council social media which are deemed to be in breach of the code of practice outlined in this policy or which are considered to be inflammatory, defamatory or libellous in nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook).
- block or ban an individual or company account from posting on the council's social media.

4.5 It is ultimately up to administrators— either acting individually or in consultation with each other - as to whether a post will be deleted and/or an account blocked.

4.6 Councillors may assist the Clerk to disseminate information however all must ensure they follow this policy.

4.7 Representatives of the Parish Council using social media should take responsibility for their own privacy settings within any platform or application.

## 5 Breaches of policy

- 5.1 Failure to comply with this policy may result in:
- a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer under the Parish Council's Code of Conduct;
  - disciplinary action in line with the Parish Council's disciplinary policy.
- 5.2 Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act 1988, could lead to criminal or civil action being taken against the individual(s) involved.
- 5.3 Bracebridge Heath Parish Council reserves the right to request the closure of any applications or removal of any content published by representatives deemed inappropriate, which may adversely affect the reputation of the Council, or put the Parish Council or an individual representative at risk of legal action.
- 5.4 The Parish Council reserves the right to remove the access to contribute to Parish Council online content from any user who breaches the terms of this policy.

## 6 Related legislation, policies & guidance

- 6.1 This policy is not a substitute for legislation, regulations and codes of practice but defines how the Council will apply relevant legislation and use social media. Some of the legislation and codes of practices used to inform this policy are listed below:
- **Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988;**  
Some aspects of this legislation are relevant. Care should be taken to ensure copyright laws are not infringed. Information shared should be attributed to the source (i.e. via web link). Fair-use and financial disclosure laws should be respected.
  - **Data Protection Act 1998**
  - **General Data Protection Regulations**
  - **Equality Act 2010**
  - **Local Government Act 1986**
  - **Electoral Commission**  
Further information can be found at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).
  - **Parish Council's Code of Conduct for Councillors**
  - **Communication policy**

## 7 Responsibilities and review

- 7.1 The Full Council is responsible for the review of this policy on a triennial basis or in response to changes in relevant legislation.

## 8 Version control and amendment history

Date approved	Version Number	Revision / amendments made	Review date
06/03/2018	1.0	New policy	06/03/2019
02/10/2018	1.1	Changes to appendix 2, review arrangements	September 2020
10/12/2020	1.2	References to committee names updated	December 2022
November 2024	1.3	Policy rewritten and condensed; header template updated	November 2027