



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION POLICY

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1. Introduction

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to parish councillors, council staff, volunteers for the Council and others who engage with the council using online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe various methods of publishing on the internet.

It includes standards and guidelines for Councillors and Council staff to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments, and the action to be taken in respect to breaches of this policy.

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables Bottisham Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves. Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content, including social media sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction.

The Council has a website, Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

2. Who is Covered by this Policy

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted Parish Councillors, council staff and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

All Councillors and staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the council, its services, employees, partners and community.

Individual Parish Councillors and council staff are responsible for what they post, both in a council and personal capacity.

In the main, Councillors and council staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of serious breaches of this policy by Councillors and employees. This may include unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive comments by an employee.

Volunteers in breach of the policy will result in the council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

The behaviour required in the Councillors Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply.

Councillors must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging, tweeting or networking.

Councillors and staff must remember that communications on the internet are permanent and public.

When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

A Councillor or council staff member's behaviour on any social media site must be consistent with the behaviour required generally.

3. How Social Media May be Used

Social media may be used for:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of Council based services, decisions and actions
- Supporting local democracy
- Distribute in whole or part information from council notices, agendas, approved minutes and dates of meetings
- Information specifically agreed to be communicated via social media at Council meetings
- Advertising events and activities that Bottisham Parish Council has organised or co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community
- Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area
- Announcing new information relevant to people living in or around the Bottisham area
- Providing and exchanging information about local services and events
- Support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- Gathering local resident's insights
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area
- Advertising vacancies for example Councillor, Clerk

- Share relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.
- Post or share relevant information from local community groups for community benefit such as information from community associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, Scouts/Guides and charities
- Link to appropriate websites and other social media accounts of sites or organisations that meet the council's expectations of conduct
- Post other items as the council see fit
- Refer resident queries via social media to the Clerk for wider dissemination to Councillors if required

Sending a message/post via Facebook or X (formerly known as Twitter) will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the council's Clerk and/or members of the council by emailing.

4. Code of Practice

Councillors and staff 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. Councillors and staff should not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face-to-face.

When participating in online communication, Councillors and staff are expected to:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative and balanced.
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents.
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative.
- Obtain permission to publish original photos or videos (posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence so Councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright).
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- Carry out spell and grammar check

Parish Councillors and council staff must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers.
- Use an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless given written permission to do so (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation)
- Present personal opinions as that of Bottisham Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets or communicates online personally, and not in the role as a Councillor or member of council staff, 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.
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council
- Make false or misleading statements
- Post personal or political content, content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council or post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks

- 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, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Language 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
- 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
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action)
- Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
- Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff or residents should report them to the Parish Clerk

5. Outbound Communication from the Council

Communication from the Council will follow recommended guidance from both Government and professional led organisations including the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) and the UK Government Legislation for Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Communication should;

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene or profane
- Not contain content that discriminates / breaches any of the Government stated protected characteristics * See Bottisham Parish Council Equality & Diversity Policy for greater detail
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright and/or have not obtained permission for
- Not contain sensitive personal / category data defined by UK GDPR law which consists of racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation
- Always ensure that the communication is generally lawful, fair and transparent and complies with all the other principles and requirements of UK GDPR
- Not use social media for the dissemination of any political advertising or benefit
- Refrain from using the Council’s Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products

Be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

Bottisham Parish Council runs its social media and website pages so that it can pass information on to residents quickly. Sites will not necessarily be checked daily and posts will not necessarily be responded to. Social media and electronic accounts are primarily a tool to pass information on.

Though Bottisham Parish Council is keen to hear residents' views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments, particularly on planning applications. The Parish Council Facebook site is not open for comments to be posted. In order to manage messages received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to forward their comments directly to the Parish Clerk or by contacting a Parish Councillor or by attending a monthly meeting.

6. Facebook Site

The Council Facebook pages intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively. The Parish Council will not reply to messages received on the Facebook page. It is purely for information only.

Bottisham Parish Council utilises Facebook as an additional proactive platform to reach the community and residents. Facebook site is not monitored 24/7 however, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant authorities. The objectives of our Facebook site are;

- to ensure it is in line with our Parish Council website,
- to aid and adhere to our policies and procedures,
- to fulfil the strategic objectives for yearly plans and
- to enable timely and relevant discussions.

Bottisham Parish Council retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language including breaches of protected characteristics
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore or inform the sender of our policy

This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

7. Bottisham Parish Council Website

The website, <https://www.bottisham-pc.gov.uk> will contain all dates for meetings along with supporting agendas and minutes. The website will also be the recommended first point of contact to obtain the yearly budget (by financial year), Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and all policies and procedures that have been approved by full council. On this site you will also find the local Bottisham magazine, The Cresset, planning applications, cemetery and burial information and how to report incidents including pot holes, refuse and street lighting. It is important to note that this site is not a community site with all events, for example, that take place in the village or day to day activities. However, the Council is committed to keep the site as relevant and up to date information and notices which may include but not limited to roadworks in the village and announcements from East Cambridgeshire District Council (ECDC).

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every enquiry we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

8. Bottisham Parish Council Email

The Clerk to the council has their own council email address clerk@bottisham-pc.gov.uk. The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate. 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. Majority of 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 parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk.

NB any emails sent to and/or copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Personal information will and must not be sent on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

All Councillors must ensure that the designated email signature is always added. This includes the statement about emails not monitored 24/7, privacy notice and transmission of files.

9. SMS (Texting)

Members and the Clerk may use SMS and other short messaging services incl. RCS and WhatsApp as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

10. Video Conferencing (Zoom / Teams etc)

If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

11. Managing Website, Social Media and Facebook Accounts

The Parish Clerk and one additional designated Parish Councillor will be responsible for managing and posting content on the Parish Council website and social media pages.

The Council will appoint a moderator to moderate Parish Council social media output and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with this Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy.

The Parish Clerk or any Councillor also acting as moderator will have authority, without notice or comment, to post and/or remove any posts from council social media pages which are deemed to be of an inflammatory, defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (ie. Facebook) and also to the Parish Clerk for council records.

The Parish Clerk and/or designated Councillor (moderator) will also be responsible for checking the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used.

No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk or full council.

12. Internal Communication and Access to Information within the Council

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council. These policies can be found on the Bottisham Parish Council website.

As more and more information become 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).

Councillors 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 and ensuring that email trails have been removed.