

Bures Hamlet Parish Council

Use of Social Media Policy

Adopted Date: November 2022

Reviewed: September 2024

1. Introduction

Employees' and councillors' use of social media in both a personal and business capacity can present risks to confidential information, the Parish Council's reputation, and can jeopardise its compliance with legal obligations. To minimise these risks, employees and councillors are expected to adhere to this policy.

The purpose of this policy is to assist employees and councillors by providing clear guidance about acceptable behaviour on social media both as private and public individuals.

This policy is underpinned by the Local Government Association (2020) Code of Conduct based on the seven general principles of conduct (the Nolan Principles) which are:

- Selflessness .
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty .
- Leadership

Building on these principles, the following general principles have been developed specifically for the role of a councillor, in accordance with the public trust placed in the Parish Council, on all occasions:

- to act with integrity and honesty
- to act lawfully
- to treat all persons fairly and with respect; and
- to lead by example and act in a way that secures public confidence in the role of councillor.
- to impartially exercise all responsibilities in the interests of the local community
- to not improperly seek to confer an advantage, or disadvantage, on any person
- to avoid conflicts of interest
- to exercise reasonable care and diligence; and
- to ensure that public resources are used prudently in accordance with the local authority's requirements and in the public interest.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all employees and councillors of Bures Hamlet Parish Council. It applies whether the social media is accessed using Parish Council IT equipment, or equipment belonging to employees or councillors.

3. Definitions

Social media is a type of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other, or to share data in a public forum. This includes online social forums such as Twitter, Facebook, Linked-In, internet newsgroups and chat rooms. Social media also covers blogs and video and image sharing websites such as YouTube and Flickr.

There are many more examples of social media than can be listed here and this is a constantly changing area. This policy refers to the examples listed and any new social media which is developed in the future.

4. Using social media sites in the name of Bures Hamlet Parish Council.

Currently, public information is displayed on the Parish Council website and the local community Facebook 'Beautiful Bures' platform. Councillors wishing to make a social media post on behalf of the Parish Council should email the Parish Clerk with the proposed content and posting instructions with a copy to the Chair and Vice Chair.

Note: where possible, Facebook posts should cross reference to the Parish Council website and provide the appropriate link. Once approved by either the Chair or Vice Chair, the Parish Clerk will make the FB post or comment as instructed.

The Parish Clerk may initiate FB posts or comments and entries to the Parish Council website without prior approval for the purpose of circulating or responding with public domain information, public service notices and details from approved Parish Council minutes or on instructions from a full council meeting.

Councillors' authority to post may be withdrawn during a defined period before local council elections in order to comply with legislation (Purdah).

5. Personal Safety and Privacy

Employees and councillors need to be aware that the information they post on their personal social media profile can make them identifiable to residents as well as people they know in a private capacity.

Online sites such as Facebook are in the public domain, and personal profile details can be seen by anyone, even if users have their privacy settings on the highest level.

Employees and councillors who have set their privacy level to the maximum can have their privacy compromised by 'friends' who may not have set their security to the same standard.

6. Key Principles

Employees and councillors must not:

- use the Cllr or Councillor title on personal social media
- present personal opinions as that of the Parish Council
- bring the Parish Council into disrepute or cause embarrassment, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Parish Council
- disclose commercially sensitive, personal, private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk
- post comments about employees or councillors without their prior approval
- upload, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent. This includes use of an individual's name or contact details without written permission to do so; publishing photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others including any link to a third-party website without checking that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.
- post, forward or link to controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks, engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications as this may constitute bullying or harassment and will bring the Parish Council into disrepute.
- conduct any online activity that is against regulation or law e.g., may be deemed libellous or that constitutes a criminal offence.

Examples of good practice:

- Be honest and open, but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the Parish Council.
- Don't escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.
- Consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g., politics and religion.
- Offer routes to enable resolution of concerns and complaints.

The above examples are not a definitive list but are examples to illustrate what misuse and good practice may look like.

Councillors must avoid posting views in advance of a decision to be debated by the Council or a Committee meeting, that may constitute predetermination or bias. The Localism Act 2011 states that councillors must not have "had or appeared to have had a closed mind (to any extent) when making the decision".

7. Addressing allegations of misuse

Any employee or councillor who feels that they have been harassed or bullied, or are offended by material posted or uploaded by an employee or councillor onto a social media website should inform the Clerk or Chair of the Parish Council who should ensure that all complaints are dealt with consistently and fairly.

For councillors, complaints will be dealt with following the Council's Complaints Policy. For employees, complaints will be dealt with following the Council's Disciplinary Procedure.