

Blackbird Leys Parish Council Social Media Policy

1. Introduction

This policy provides a framework for the responsible use of social media by Blackbird Leys Parish Council (the Council), its Councillors, staff, and others engaging with the Council. Social media offers valuable opportunities to communicate with residents, promote community events, share information, and enhance transparency. However, it must be used in a way that upholds the Council's reputation, complies with legal requirements, and avoids risks such as bias, predetermination, or misinformation.

The Council currently maintains official accounts on Facebook to disseminate information about Council activities, meetings, events, and local news. This complements traditional communication methods, such as the Council website, and public notices. The policy recognises that many Councillors are active on various social media platforms in personal capacities, including those affiliated with political parties, and emphasises the need to separate personal views from official Council positions to prevent perceptions of bias or predetermination.

This policy aligns with best practices from sources like the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) guidelines and the Local Government Association (LGA). It complies with relevant legislation, including the Localism Act 2011, the Code of Conduct for Councillors, Data Protection Act 2018 (GDPR), and Freedom of Information Act 2000.

2. Definitions and Scope

Social media refers to online platforms and tools for user-generated content, interaction, and sharing, including but not limited to:

- Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook).
- Microblogging and content-sharing sites (e.g., X – formerly Twitter, TikTok, YouTube).
- Blogs, forums, wikis, and podcasts.
- Email and messaging apps used for Council business (e.g., WhatsApp groups for internal coordination).
- The Council's website and any integrated commenting features.

This policy applies to:

- All Councillors and Council staff (including the Clerk) when using social media in an official capacity or when their activity could be linked to the Council.
- Personal use by Councillors and staff where it relates to Council matters or could impact the Council's reputation.

- Third parties (e.g., residents, community groups) interacting with official Council accounts.

It applies during work hours and outside them, on Council-owned equipment or personal devices. It does not regulate purely personal use unrelated to the Council, but Councillors must remain mindful of their obligations under the Code of Conduct.

3. Aims and Objectives

The Council uses social media to:

- Engage with residents, businesses, and visitors across demographics.
- Provide timely updates on Council decisions, meetings, consultations, and services.
- Promote local events, achievements, and partnerships (e.g., with police, health services, or community groups).
- Share emergency information or redirects to official sources.
- Foster positive community dialogue while maintaining neutrality.

Social media activity must integrate with the Council's broader Communications Policy and support objectives like transparency, inclusivity, and value for money. Different platforms may serve varied purposes (e.g. Facebook for broader announcements), but all adhere to this policy.

4. Responsibilities

4.1 The Parish Clerk (or Designated Officer)

- Acts as the primary administrator for official accounts, responsible for posting, monitoring, and moderating content.
- Ensures all posts are accurate, neutral, and compliant with this policy.
- Responds to queries directed to the Council via official accounts within reasonable timescales.
- Maintains security settings, passwords, and access logs.
- Reports breaches or issues to the Council Chair and, if necessary, relevant authorities.

4.2 Councillors

- Where a Councillor has been granted direct posting access by council resolution, they may post approved council business without prior Clerk approval. Any other content must be approved by the Clerk before posting.
- Where the Council has resolved by formal minute to grant a Councillor direct posting access to an official account, that access is limited to the scope approved in the resolution. The Clerk shall maintain a register of all Councillors holding such access.

- When using personal accounts, must clearly distinguish personal views from Council positions (e.g., using disclaimers like: "Views expressed are my own and do not represent Blackbird Leys Parish Council").
- Councillors affiliated with political parties must not use official channels for party promotion and should avoid posts that could imply Council endorsement of political views.
- Must declare interests on social media if discussing matters before the Council and avoid predetermination (see Section 8).
- Are personally responsible for their online activity and must comply with the Code of Conduct.

4.3 All Users

- Treat social media as a public forum: content is permanent and accessible worldwide.
- Respect confidentiality, privacy, and data protection rules.
- Report inappropriate content or concerns to the Clerk immediately.

5. Official Council Accounts

- Platforms: Currently Facebook. Expansion to other platforms (e.g., X or TikTok) requires full Council approval after a risk assessment. The Council's Facebook presence is maintained as a Facebook Page and not a personal Profile. This ensures the Council retains full administrative control, allows multiple authorised users to be managed appropriately, and maintains a clear distinction between the Council's official presence and any personal accounts held by Councillors or staff.
- Content Examples:
 - Agendas, minutes, and meeting dates.
 - Event promotions and good news stories.
 - Links to consultations, planning applications, or partner updates.
 - Emergency alerts or public safety information.
- Prohibited Content:
 - Political campaigning, endorsements, or biased commentary.
 - Confidential information or personal data without consent.
 - Commercial promotions unless Council-approved.
- Accessibility:
 - Posts must include alt text for images, captions for videos, and inclusive language to comply with equality duties.
- Comments:
 - Comments on all official posts are disabled as standard. Residents wishing to engage with the Council should do so through official channels including the Council's website, email or telephone. This ensures the Clerk is not required to moderate public commentary on official social media accounts.

6. Personal Use by Councillors and Staff

- Personal accounts should not use Council logos, email addresses, or imply official representation. Association with the Council (e.g., listing it in profiles) should be minimal to avoid implying endorsement.
- Disclaimers are mandatory for posts related to Council matters.
- Avoid discussing undecided Council issues to prevent predetermination claims.
- If a personal post is misinterpreted as official, clarify immediately and notify the Clerk.
- Councillors active on multiple platforms must apply this policy consistently.
- Personal use is not permitted on Council equipment during work hours unless for brief, incidental purposes. On personal devices during work hours, use should be limited and not interfere with duties.

7. Guidelines and Code of Practice

All users must:

- Be respectful, accurate, and professional: Use factual language, avoid exaggeration, and correct errors promptly.
- Protect privacy: Do not share personal details without consent; obtain permission for photos/videos (especially of minors).
- Promote inclusivity: Avoid discriminatory language based on protected characteristics (e.g., age, disability, gender, race, religion).
- Respond appropriately: Direct complex queries to official channels; avoid arguments or escalation.
- Comply with laws: No defamatory, obscene, harassing, or copyrighted content without permission.
- Report any social media content that disparages or reflects poorly on the Council to the Clerk or Chair.
- If contacted by media or social media outlets for comment on Council matters, refer to the Clerk and do not respond unless authorised.

Do not:

- Post in haste: Review content before publishing.
- Engage in hostile interactions or "trolling."
- Use social media during meetings unless for official purposes.
- Breach GDPR by sharing sensitive data.
- Post disparaging or defamatory statements about the Council, its stakeholders, or sensitive topics (e.g., planning applications).

- Post anything that could be seen as bullying, harassment, or discriminatory—these rules apply to personal accounts as much as official ones.

8. Legal and Ethical Considerations

- **Bias and Predetermination:** Councillors must not post views on planning applications, licensing, or other decisions that could suggest a closed mind. Such posts may require declaring an interest and abstaining from votes. Political affiliations must not influence official content.
- **Libel and Defamation:** Untrue statements damaging reputations can lead to legal action.
- **Data Protection (GDPR):** Handle personal data securely; report breaches to the Clerk.
- **Elections and Purdah:** During pre-election periods, official accounts must remain neutral and avoid promoting individuals or parties.
- **Freedom of Information:** Social media content may be subject to FOI requests; archive posts as required.
- **Monitoring:** The Council may monitor social media usage on Council equipment or accounts for compliance, as outlined in the Privacy Notice.
- **Recruitment:** Social media may be used for due diligence on candidates (e.g., internet searches), as detailed in the Privacy Notice.
- **Breaches:** Any violation may lead to action under the Council's disciplinary policy, Code of Conduct, or referral to standards bodies.

9. Moderation and Monitoring

- The Clerk will moderate official accounts, removing inappropriate content (e.g., spam, abuse, misinformation) and blocking repeat offenders.
- **Removal Criteria:** Defamatory, discriminatory, commercial spam, or unrelated/off-topic posts.
- **Responses:** Factual and polite; escalate complaints via the Council's Complaints Procedure.
- **Monitoring:** As comments are disabled on official posts, active moderation requirements are limited. The Clerk will check accounts periodically and address any issues within the next working day.
- **Archiving:** Retain records of posts for at least 12 months or as per retention policy.

10. Training and Review

- All Councillors and staff will receive training on this policy upon adoption and annually thereafter.
- The policy will be reviewed annually or sooner if platforms change or new legislation arises (next review: Feb 2027).

- Updates require full Council approval.

Adopted by Blackbird Leys Parish Council on February 2026