

# **Birchwood Town Council**

## **Social Media Policy October 2024**

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### **1. Introduction**

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. It includes websites and sites based on user participation, user-generated content and user interaction.

This policy is intended to guide Councillors and Council staff in making appropriate decisions about the use of social media, and to outline Birchwood Town Council's (BTC's) position on various aspects of its use.

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

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Birchwood Town Council's website
- Birchwood Town Council's Facebook page
- Email
- Any other social networking sites
- Other public Facebook pages and social media sites (e.g. Birchwood Community & Chat)
- X (formally Twitter) and other micro-blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs, Vlogs and discussion forums

This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by Birchwood Town Council. BTC's current Code of Conduct applies to online activity / social media in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. What is unacceptable offline is unacceptable online.

Members of the public, Members or Officers may make a complaint about a Councillor if they breach the Code of Conduct.

Birchwood Town Council may, at a future date, add to the channels of communication that it uses. If such changes occur this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This policy may be amended at any time.

## **2. How Social Media will be used by the Council**

Social media may be used for:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the dissemination of information regarding Council based decisions and actions
- Supporting local democracy
- Distributing 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 Birchwood Town Council has organised, co-organised, or supports in some way, 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 Birchwood area
- Providing and exchanging information about local services and events
- Supporting community cohesion and resilience
- Gathering local resident's insights and opinions
- Promoting cultural events in the area
- Advertising Town Council staff vacancies
- To potentially consider the public Social Media presence of applicants for staff vacancies
- Sharing 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 BTC'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.

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

Birchwood Town Council uses its Facebook page to pass information on to residents quickly. Social media accounts will not necessarily be checked daily and posts will not necessarily be responded to. BTC's Facebook page is primarily a means of passing information on.

Whilst BTC 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.

In order to manage the messages received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to send their comments directly to BTC. This can be done by emailing the Clerk, by contacting a Town Councillor or by attending a monthly meeting.

### **3. Who is covered by this policy**

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted Town Councillors, Council staff and if relevant at any time, to 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 Town Councillors and Council staff are responsible for what they post, both in a Council and personal capacity.

Generally speaking, 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 serious breaches of this policy by 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 must 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 posting in any form on social media.

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

Even when communicating in a ‘private’ group it should be ensured that the Town 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.

### **4. Code of Practice**

When using social media, 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 must:

- 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, never condescending or 'loud' i.e. use sentence case format and not write in capital letters or red to emphasise points
- Seek 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)
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Be objective, balanced and accurate
- Spell and grammar check everything

Town Councillors and Council staff must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media (home address, phone numbers, etc.)
- 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 Birchwood Town 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
- 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 written parental permission
- Post obscene material (a criminal offence which is subject to a custodial sentence)

- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person)
  - 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
- 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 a Council meeting.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that maligns Town Councillors, Council staff or residents, should report them to the Clerk for referral to the moderator(s) and/or the Council as required.

## **5. Managing Social Media Accounts**

Birchwood Town Council's Officers will be responsible for posting content on the Council's website and Facebook page.

'Official' posts placed on the Council's website and / or Facebook page may be shared by Councillor's for publication on a local social media site.

The Council will appoint a moderator(s), to moderate Town Council social media publications and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

The moderator(s) will have authority, without notice or comment, to 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 (e.g. Facebook) and also to the Clerk for Council records.

The moderator(s) in consultation with the Clerk, will also have the authority to block or ban access from an individual or company's account to BTC's social media pages.

When participating in online communication, BTC will generally allow posts on its Facebook page from members of the public that:

- Are responsible and respectful
- Respect the privacy of Councillors, staff and residents
- Are objective, balanced, informative and accurate

Posts may be deleted and the holder of an account banned if a comment or post:

- Publishes the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers
- Makes intentionally false or misleading statements

- Mentions an individual's name in social media communications or posts information about an individual unless deemed reasonable (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation)
- Makes 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 in partnership with
- Includes potentially inflammatory, defamatory, libellous or offensive remarks
- Posts online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- Uses language that may be deemed offensive, in particular relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief
- Engages in personal attacks, online fights, and/or hostile communications
- Includes the publication of photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Includes 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)
- Includes obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conducts any online activity that violates laws, regulations or constitutes a criminal offence

It is ultimately up to the moderator(s) – in consultation with the Clerk - as to whether a post will be deleted and/or an account blocked.

The Clerk and other Officers will also be responsible for checking the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used.

Councillors may assist the Clerk to disseminate information however all must ensure they follow this policy. No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the Clerk and / or full Council.

## **6. Personal Social Media use (staff)**

Staff must adhere to the conditions of the Social Media Policy as outlined above at all times.

Use of social networking applications by staff in work time for personal use is not permitted (unless an exception has been agreed with the Clerk, or in an emergency).

Staff may use social networking applications on their personal devices during their break times.

Staff must not post comments about sensitive community topics, such as planning applications.

If staff see content on social media that disparages or reflects poorly on the Council, they should refer this to the Clerk.

The Council has the right, in certain circumstances, to monitor our employees' usage of the internet or email at work.

The Council has the right, in certain circumstances, to monitor our employees' public social media output.

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This policy will be reviewed on a regular basis, or as necessary if any changes are made to the Council's social media presence.

Further useful information for Councillors regarding social media can be found at:

[www.local.gov.uk/our-support/communications-and-community-engagement/social-media-guidance-councillors](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/communications-and-community-engagement/social-media-guidance-councillors)

and

[SLCC | Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media](#)

This policy was first approved by the Council on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024