

## **COMMUNICATIONS POLICY**

### **Including:**

#### **Telephone, Internet, Email, and Social Media Policy**

This policy covers communications undertaken by staff and members of the Council and sets out the restrictive use of the Town Council's electronic equipment, namely, computers and telephones.

The Town Council reserves the right to monitor telephone, email and internet usage in accordance with the law, in particular the latest Data Protection Act and the Human Rights Act.

#### **Telephone etiquette**

All employees must follow the procedure outlined below when using the Council's telephone:

- Answer all calls by stating the name of the Town Council
- Be polite at all times
- Do not be rude or abrupt to callers
- Do not use offensive language
- Do not swear
- Check the telephone frequently for messages from callers and respond in a timely manner

Employees may make and receive personal calls as long as they are brief and infrequent. This applies to calls on the Council's land line or employees' personal mobile phones.

#### **Use of Email**

The council provides all staff and members with an e-mail account as a vital tool to fulfil the council's objectives and to enable them to communicate effectively with other personnel, both within the council and externally. All employees and members must follow the procedure outlined below when sending and receiving emails on behalf of the Town Council:

- All emails relating to Council Business must be sent using the Council email account provided and by the authorised user of that account.
- Council email accounts are not to be used for personal email communications
- Only agreed email signatures may be used
- Be aware that agreements made by email may have the same status as letters or formal contracts. Seek Council guidance before making any agreement by email.
- All messages must use appropriate business language
- A waiver clause will be included at the end of each email message
- No message should be sent, either internally or externally, which contains illegal, offensive, obscene, racist or abusive material (for example, pornography) or libellous,

defamatory or discriminatory material, or material which may bring the Council into disrepute. You are responsible for emails you send. Emails could be used as evidence in a tribunal or other court proceedings.

- Email messages cannot be guaranteed to be private and secure: do not send confidential, sensitive or personal data via email unless approved by Council. Remember that any message you send could potentially be forwarded to others by the recipient.
- Only attachments from a trusted source may be downloaded
- Do not send external emails to multiple recipients without using the Blind Carbon Copy function
- Where a mailing is received by multiple recipients question whether a 'reply to all' is appropriate
- Ensure when forwarding messages that there is nothing in the entire email chain that should not be passed on to a third party, or that would breach any of the previous rules

If you are aware of any abuses of this policy they should be reported to the Clerk. If you are uncertain about any aspects of this policy and how it applies to you, please discuss with the Clerk.

### **Use of the Internet**

Where Staff Members and Councillors are provided with computer hardware and portable devices by the Council the use of these devices is strictly limited to Council Business.

Sites should not be accessed if they are likely to contain illegal or offensive material, for example, pornography, or material that may be considered obscene or abusive.

Downloading of video, music files, games, software files and other computer programs - for non-work related purposes - is strictly prohibited. These types of files consume large quantities of storage space on the system (and can slow it down considerably) and may violate copyright laws.

Councillors and Staff must abide by the rules put into place under the Council's **Information Security Policy** both in the use of Council devices and when using their own devices for Council Business.

## **Using Social Media Sites - Employees**

### **1. Policy statement**

1.1. This section of the policy is intended to help employees make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as social networking websites, forums, message boards, blogs or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

1.2. This policy outlines the standards the Council requires employees to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which your use of social media will be monitored and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

### **2. The scope of the policy**

2.1. All employees are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the Council.

2.2. Breach of this policy by employees may be dealt with under our Disciplinary Procedure and, in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal.

### **3. Responsibility for implementation of the policy**

3.1. The Council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy.

3.2. The Clerk is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for changes to minimise risks to our work.

3.3. All employees should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. Any breach of this policy should be reported to the Clerk.

3.4. Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Clerk.

### **4. Using social media sites in the name of the council**

4.1. The Clerk and administration staff are permitted to post material on a social media website in the name of the Council and on its behalf in accordance with the rules and scope of this policy.

4.2. The Town Council's own Social Media sites should only be used to pass on useful information and to share news which may be of interest. It can promote local organisations and events but should avoid promoting business interests.

4.3. Commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information must not be posted

4.4 Do not upload, post or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.

4.5. Do not up load, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent.

4.6. Before you include a link to a third party website, check that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.

4.7. Don't escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.

4.2. If you are not sure if your comments are appropriate do not post them until you have checked with the Clerk.

## **5. Monitoring use of social media websites**

5.1. Employees should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for Council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees under our Disciplinary Procedure

5.2. Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against you and the Council.

5.3. In particular a serious case of uploading, posting forwarding or posting a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, will probably amount to gross misconduct.

- a) pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature);
- b) a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation;
- c) material which is offensive, obscene, criminal, discriminatory, derogatory or may cause embarrassment to the Council our councillors or our employees;
- d) confidential information about the council or anyone else
- e) any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, whether for you or the organisation); or
- f) material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person.

Any such action will be addressed under the Disciplinary Procedure

5.4. Where evidence of misuse is found the Council may undertake a more detailed investigation involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or managers involved in the investigation. If necessary such information may be handed to the police in connection with a criminal investigation.

5.5. If you notice any use of social media by other employees in breach of this policy please report it to the Clerk

**The Council has drawn up a detailed Social Media Policy for Council Members as an appendix (Appendix 2) of its Standing Orders**

## Social Media Policy for Town Councillors

### 1. Background

The purpose of the protocol is to ensure that Councillors make use of social media effectively whilst avoiding potential accusations that they may be breaching the Council's Code of Conduct. It is also designed to ensure that the reputation of the Council is not adversely affected and that the Council is not subject to legal challenge because of information posted on social networking sites or blogs.

### 2. Application

2.1 This protocol applies to you as a Member of this Council when you are acting or purporting to act in your role as a Member and you have a responsibility to comply with the provisions of this protocol. The protocol should be read in conjunction with Bollington Town Council's Code of Conduct which forms Appendix 2 of its Standing Orders.

2.2 You need to bear in mind the Code of Conduct when you blog, use social networking sites or any other digital content publication service. You should pay particular attention to the following:

- Disrespect to other Councillors or members of the public
- Bullying of anyone
- Disclosure of confidential Council information
- Bringing the Council into Disrepute;
- Misuse of Council resources.

2.3 It is difficult to give definitive advice on the application of the Code of Conduct, as each blog and social networking page is different. The content of a blog or other social networking tool and the circumstances surrounding its creation will determine whether it might be covered by the Code of Conduct.

There are However two general rules that Councillors should bear in mind when deciding on whether to publish content:

- 1) Only publish what you would say verbally in public, even in an informal discussion, when representing the Council.
- 2) Only publish what you could defend in court if asked to do so.

2.4 Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code of Conduct. Councillors are encouraged to respect the Seven Principles of Public Life as set out in section 28(1) of the Localism Act:

1. Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

2. Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their

work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

3. Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

4. Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

5. Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

6. Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

7. Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour.

They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

2.5 While your conduct may not be a breach of the Code it may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for your office and the Council.

### **3. Associated Policies**

3.1 This protocol should be read in conjunction with the Members Code of Conduct (Appendix 2 of Standing Orders), The Town Council's Financial Regulations (Appendix 1 of Standing Orders) and the Town Council's Equal Opportunities Employment Policy.

### **4. Introduction**

4.1 All members of the Town Council are required to act in accordance with the Members Code of Conduct whilst acting in their official capacity. Blogging and social networking are effective methods for Councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who would not normally have access to local Councillors and politics.

4.2 However, it is not always clear whether such activities are covered by the Code of Conduct. This guide is intended to assist Councillors in complying with the Code and ensuring that the use of online media is well received. You should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you must when making statements in person or in writing. You will also need to think about whether you are seen to be, or give the impression that you are acting in your official capacity as a Councillor.

4.3 If you do give the impression that you are acting in your official capacity whilst

blogging or using social media, such activity may be subject to the Code of Conduct. Individual Councillors are permitted to write their own official blogs as Members of Bollington Town Council but in these they must conform to the protocols of the Council. If you have a private blog you must bear in mind that if you refer to council business in it, you may be viewed as acting in your official capacity. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct, you are requested to observe the following guidelines:

**You should:**

- a. Consider whether you need to set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- b. Keep an eye out for defamatory, untrue or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views and to prevent any potential libel action being taken against you
- c. Act to:
  - Eliminate unlawful discrimination;
  - Promote equality of opportunity;
  - Promote equality of access;
  - Demonstrate that we value diversity; and
  - Promote good relations between diverse communities.
- d. Treat service users, employees, other Councillors contractors and members of the public with respect and dignity and according to the framework set out in legislation. The Town Council recognises that there are groups and individuals in society who are disadvantaged and discriminated against. You should ensure that no one is treated less fairly on the grounds of age, disability, gender, gender identity, marriage/civil partnership, pregnancy/maternity, race, religion/ belief, sexual orientation, or on any other grounds, as set out in legislation.
- e. Be aware that the higher your profile as a Councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network
- f. Be careful about being ‘friends’ with service users who are vulnerable adults or children, as this could be regarded as a safeguarding issue
- g. Ensure you use Council facilities appropriately; and be aware that any posts you make using Council facilities will be viewed as being made in your official capacity and/ or an inappropriate use of Council resources
- h. Be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a Councillor, you will be seen as acting in your official capacity
- i. Make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.
- j. consider that English Law allows actions for libel to be brought in the High Court for any published statements alleged to defame a named or identifiable individual or individuals. Blogging, social media and other forms of digital content publication are covered by the libel laws.

**You should not:**

- a. blog in haste
- b. place images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission
- c. post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- d. use council facilities for personal or party-political blogs
- e. refer in a blog to any information identified by the Council as confidential or exempt
- f. disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone or information acquired by you which you believe or are aware is of a confidential nature
- g. publish personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission to do so
- h. give the impression that you are expressing the views of the Council where it is not appropriate to do so
- i. use online accounts and digital publishing services associated with a specific council office if you no longer hold that office, or during Purdah
- j. if you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, publish anything on your blog that might suggest you do not have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining.

## **5. Derogatory comments**

5.1 On occasion, Councillors might find themselves the subject of offensive or defamatory remarks on other people's blogs or networking sites. The following approach is advised in such circumstances, and applies equally to any form of publication:

- Pursue a policy of indifference to such remarks, but if you do wish to respond, do not be tempted into retaliation because you may risk breaching the Code. You could ask the blog owner/person making the remarks to remove them from the site
- If the person making the comments is a local authority, town or parish Councillor, discuss the situation with the Monitoring Officer. It might be the case that the person has breached the Code of Conduct by making the remarks, and it could be appropriate to make a complaint to the Standards Committee.
- Aside from any possible breaches of the Code of Conduct, the matter is usually deemed private between yourself and the individual. The Council cannot provide legal assistance for pursuit of a claim through the civil courts, but you may decide that you wish to take independent legal advice.

## **6. Use of Social Media During and after Council Meetings**

- 6.1 Members are permitted to use social media for the reporting of proceedings of public Council meetings. If Members wish to use social media during meetings they should seek the consent of the Chairman who will make it clear to any members of the public attending that this activity has been authorised. Members will need to consider whether using social media may distract them from participating and understanding information that is being shared at the meeting prior to a decision being made.
- 6.2 Councillors should however switch their mobile phone or other equipment to silent mode, so that no disruption is caused to proceedings. The Chairman of the relevant meeting will have absolute discretion to prevent the use of social media if such use is not in keeping with this protocol in their view or if the use is deemed to be disrupting the meeting.
- 6.3 Members wishing to film meetings will need to seek permission by resolution of the Council or committee and have provided at least 24 hours' notice to the Mayor or committee chairman