

Barton-le-Clay Parish Council Online Engagement and Communication Policy

Version 5

February 2018

Introduction

Online social media websites offer unparalleled access to the views and opinions of the electors of Barton-le-Clay Parish Council (here on: BPC) as well as the opportunity to communicate Parish Council business more widely in the community and interact more dynamically with the electorate.

There is, however, a risk of reputational damage to BPC if its social media footprint is not carefully managed. Guidance is thus required to ensure that the Council is not brought into disrepute through poorly managed communications, sending of conflicting messages, the management of abuse and slander or any other challenging online situation.

There is further reputational risk to the Council if individual Councillors are not consistent in their social media strategies when representing the Council.

Similarly, the Council's website can ease the access of information to parishioners and further enhance public engagement with Council business, but clear guidance on its use is required to avoid reputational damage.

This document provides guidance on the usage of the BPC website, BPC owned social media accounts and the personal social media accounts and online presence of Councillors.

This policy was previously known as the 'Social Media Policy' but was updated to reflect the inclusion of BPC's website in November 2016 and updated further to incorporate the presence of a BPC affiliated blog and improve security provisions for BPCs online footprint.

Aims of the BPC Online Engagement policy

The aim of this policy document is to give guidance to the administrators of BPCs social media accounts and website and the wider Council of their responsibilities when using social media as a representative of BPC. More specifically it should ensure that:

- A consistent approach is taken by Councillors when representing BPC using social media
- Relevant Council material remains secure and Council business is not compromised through the use of social media

- BPC’s social media footprint acts to enrich its existing online offerings
- Councillors are aware of how their personal social media accounts should be managed to not conflict with BPC interests.
- The website is used to host and publicise appropriate material

BPC’s Social Media Footprint

BPC manages four social media artefacts:

- “Barton-le-clay Parish Clerk” Facebook account
- “Barton-le-clay Assistant Parish Clerk” Facebook account

These accounts will be named as the individuals who hold the post. At the time of writing Ann Merryweather is the Parish Clerk and Suzanne Cowie is the Asst. Clerk

- “Barton-le-Clay Parish Council” Facebook Group
- “@BartonPC” Twitter account

The Twitter account is a shared resource and is accessible by anyone on the Council, or its staff who requests the login credentials

Further social media accounts may be adopted in the future, but would require an amendment to this social media policy.

The role of BPCs Social Media Accounts

BPC’s social media accounts will be used to communicate BPC business out to the local community. The initial communications will include only:

- The notification and links to BPC meeting minutes hosted on www.bartonleclay.co.uk
- The notification of upcoming meetings and dissemination of materials associated with events hosted by, and affiliated with, BPC (e.g. the Horticultural Show programme)
- Advising electors and other bodies of when and how to formally contact BPC on specific issues
- Other factual notices associated with BPC (e.g. calls for new Councillors)
- Discretionary reposting/retweeting of other social media items that include BPC

BPCs social media accounts will not be used for any of the following:

- Advertising commercial enterprises

- Formally answering the questions of electors or offering formal advice to the electorate
- Offering subjective opinion on local issues

If the Council is asked to publish materials outside of either of these lists, the Councillors responsible for administering the accounts should use their discretion as to whether it is appropriate to post the material acting as BPC.

As a guiding principle, the function of BPC's Social Media outlets are to drive traffic to the BPC website and the content posted to the BPC's social media holdings should not be any more intrusive than the information available from www.bartonleclay.co.uk.

Setting up BPCs social media accounts

The accounts will be set up free-of-charge by a member of the Council and the username/password combinations will be communicated to the Clerk in person.

The imagery used on the banners of the Facebook group and Twitter feed will be chosen in liaison with the clerk at the discretion of the Council.

Managing BPCs social media accounts

The Clerk will be the overarching owner of the social media accounts and will have the final say on their efficacy for meeting the above objectives, but the day to day running of the accounts will be delegated to a number of members of the Council. Where disputes between Councillors about what should be posted to the account occur, the Council will vote at the next available meeting.

When points are raised on social media which require formal contact with the Council, the accounts will be used to encourage electors to contact the Clerk directly using the recognised methods of contact (e-mail, telephone and post). Social media sites will **not** be a recognised method of formally contacting the Council.

When issues are raised that might require discussion at a Council meeting, the Councillor responsible for the day to day running of the account will alert the Clerk and discuss the possibility of raising the issue at a Council meeting.

Abusive, discriminatory or libellous comments and behaviours will not be tolerated toward the accounts. If group members engage in these kinds of behaviours, their accounts will be removed and blocked from contacting the BPC accounts.

The accounts will be managed on a 'best efforts' basis by the Council, no service level agreements will be stipulated between the Council and the electors on the use of social media.

Both accounts will contain the following introductory text describing the ways the electors should utilise the account:

"The Barton-le-Clay Parish Council Facebook and Twitter accounts (@BartonPC) share current and recent developments in Parish Council business with the local community.

Residents of Barton-le-Clay or those with an interest in Barton-le-Clay can apply to join the group or follow the Facebook account holders or Twitter handle as they wish.

These accounts/this feed will not be used for the advertising or promotion of commercial enterprise or the sale of goods. A number of other Barton-le-Clay Facebook groups facilitate these services and any posts pertaining to these activities will be removed at the earliest convenience.

Commenting on the posts delivered through this account/feed does not guarantee a reply from a Parish Council member. The supported, official method of contacting the Parish Council remains through post (to 1 Windsor Parade, Windsor Road, Barton-le-Clay, MK45 4NA) or email to theparishclerk@bartonleclay.co.uk.

BPC's accounts enact a zero tolerance policy toward abuse or discrimination of any kind, those exhibiting these behaviours will be blocked and their posts will be deleted. Similarly the posting of any material that could be considered offensive to other users will be deleted."

The accounts will, initially, be managed using personal hardware. In time, if required, the Council might consider the purchase of a Council owned iPad or similar device with which to manage the account.

It is the responsibility of the Councillors currently in charge of running the account to action the joining of new followers or the blocking of those not compliant with the above statement.

The Personal Social Media Footprint of Councillors

In the modern age of social media ubiquity it is expected that a number of Councillors will maintain a number of personal social media accounts.

When managing their own accounts Councillors must ensure that their comments will not adversely affect the Council or its business, be damaging to its reputation or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviours as representatives of BPC:

- Councillors are personally responsible for the content posted on their social media accounts
- Councillors should handle any data in accordance with Data Protection legislation
- When using personal social media accounts, Councillors must make it clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the Council, or that they are expressing the Council's views.
- Councillors must comply with other Council policies when using social media. E.g. they should be careful not to breach Council confidentiality and proprietary policies.

- Councillors should not publish any material or comment that could undermine public confidence in them as Councillors or in the position of trust they hold within the community

Social Media During Council Meetings

Some Parish Councils see fit to post updates to social media of Council meetings as they happen. Initially, BPC will not adopt this policy and will encourage Councillors to wait until after the meeting has concluded before posting comments about the meeting on social media.

The Parish Council Website

BPC's website (www.bartonleclay.co.uk) was re-platformed to Wordpress in November 2016. As part of the commissioning of the new site, this policy has been updated to provide guidance on what the site should be used for.

The website contains information on the goals and ethos of the Council as well as contact details for the Parish Clerk. Additionally, the site has a 'Document Archive' where it is proposed that the following documents will be stored for reference:

- Full Council and Committee minutes
- Full Council and Committee Agendas
- Standing orders of the Council
- The Council's Financial Regulations
- The Council's Complaints Procedure

The site has the capability to host a number of other advanced features, such as online polling, video content and opinion blogging, which the Council might, in time, wish to make use of provided these activities are in keeping with the principles outlined above.

In January 2018 it was decided to add additional 'administrator' members to the website's underlying infrastructure and services, through both Wordpress (where content is managed) and Namesco (where access and mailboxes are hosted).

This change was recommended because previously a shared account (with a shared password) was used and this was deemed less secure than having individual management accounts.

The Parish Council Affiliated Blog Trial

In February 2018 The Council agreed that the delivery of a monthly blog written by a member of the Council about its business over that month would help to make the business of the Council more accessible to its residents.

The blog, "Seeking Council" was proposed as an informal, but professional, opinion piece on the activities of the Council and any pertinent viewpoints on local politics of the time (e.g. The Local Plan or Policing), hosted through WordPress.

Initially the blog would run for a 6 issue trial between February 2018 and September 2018 whereby challenges around the content, tone, governance and delivery of the blog would be identified and resolved before the Council committed to running the blog over the longer term. During the trial, the blog would be written by a single member of the Council, but would require agreement from a second member before publishing.

Links to the blog site would be included on the BPC website proper, but the blog itself would be hosted externally. This is to maintain the separation of duties between the 'official' business of BPC and the opinions posed by the blog.

08 February 2018