

## **Bere Ferrers Parish Council**

### **Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy**

The use of digital and social media, and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses, and agencies it works with and serves.

The Council has a website, noticeboards, Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

The Council Facebook page intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.

#### **Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:**

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
- Not contain any personal information.
- If it is official Council business, it will be moderated by the Clerk to the Council;
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

#### **Parish Council Facebook account**

A Facebook account can be used to inform residents of the work of the Parish Council, to promote information out to the community but will not be used to engage in a two-way dialogue.

The site is not monitored 24/7 and we will not be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media posts to us.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or members of the Council by emailing.

We retain the right to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy, or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that: *'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'*.

If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

### **Parish Council Website**

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

### **Parish Council email**

The Clerk to the Council has their own council email address [clerk@bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk). The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 9 am to 2 pm, and the Clerk aims to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate.

Councillors have been provided with an email account 'first.surname@bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk' specifically for their work as Parish Councillors.

The Council believes this is the most efficient and effective way of working together and keeping in touch with the community but before Councillors can make use of this facility, they need to have the following information:

1. First, and most important: this email account must not be used to make decisions or influence decisions that should be made at a meeting of the Council. Standing Orders and the Code of Conduct are clear on the rules of debate and Councillors should check them if they are in any doubt.
2. The law does not allow Councillors to act independently and every Councillor should make sure that they do not imply that the content of their emails (whether .gov.uk or private email) represents the opinion or policy of the Council as a whole. As an individual, a Councillor can think, say, and write what he/she likes, but as a Councillor only the view of the whole Council can be given, whether the Councillor agrees with the decision or not.
3. When a Councillor uses the Parish Council account to send an email, the recipient can be excused for thinking it is an 'official' communication sent on behalf of the Council. All Councillors should be particularly careful if they are agreeing to do something that may be seen as a commitment by the Parish Council.
4. Neither private nor Parish Council emails are confidential; every email is stored in the archive and is available to the public through a Freedom of Information or Data Protection request. Although the emails will be cleared of any personal data before they are released, it is better to avoid disclosing anything personal or confidential in the first place; email is not a secure medium.

5. No disclaimer will help if a Councillor sends an email that contains illegal, offensive, obscene, racist, abusive material or libellous, defamatory, or discriminative material which may bring the Council into disrepute.
6. The only person who can send an official email is the Clerk who writes on behalf of the Councillors to give the Council's views.
7. If important issues are raised by parishioners or other bodies, after discussion with the Chair and/or Vice Chair the Clerk will forward the email to all Councillors for information but not discussion, as this could be considered pre-determination.
8. At the request of the Clerk and with the agreement of the Chair/Vice Chair, in exceptional situations it may be appropriate for a Parish Councillor to issue correspondence in his/her own name. Such correspondence must make it clear that it has been written in an official capacity and has been authorised. The terms and conditions for the bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk domain is given below. By using the Parish Council's email address, a Councillor is agreeing he/she understands them and agrees to abide by them. These are designed to help keep the email system healthy and avoid potential misunderstandings.

#### **Terms and conditions of use**

- Whereas Bere Ferrers Parish Council (the Council) is the licensee of the domain bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk (the Domain) it authorises its Councillors and Officers to hold and use email accounts within the Domain. The account holders agree that the Council is a legal entity in its own right and separate from any of its Councillors.
- The Council shall be held harmless from any claims made or views expressed or any other content within an email distributed from the domain by its Councillors through the inclusion of a footnote Disclaimer, the wording of which has been determined by the Clerk and included here. The Disclaimer will be appended automatically to all outgoing emails.
- A Councillor should not include the words "Bere Ferrers Parish Council" in their signature without their Parish Councillor title, as this may imply to the reader that the email has been authored by the Council itself.
- A Councillor may not use the words "on behalf of" or "for" in front of the words "Bere Ferrers Parish Council" or otherwise give any impression that they are representing the Council as part of their email signature without the express permission of the Clerk.
- An email may be signed by the Council itself by using only the words "Bere Ferrers Parish Council". Any such email must be both sent from the Clerk's account clerk@bereferrersparishcouncil.gov.uk and be authored by the Clerk.
- An email may be signed by the Clerk by using his/her name, title, and the words "Bere Ferrers Parish Council". An email authored by the Clerk shall be the same as if it had been authored by the Council itself.
- All outgoing emails from the domain regardless of the author shall observe relevant data protection legislation and, where there are multiple private addressees who have no association, such emails shall be distributed by blind copy only.
- Councillors may use the Council's email accounts for council business only.

### **Internal communication and access to information within the Council**

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

#### **Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council.**

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option, if possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

Adopted: Full Council Meeting, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2025. Minute: 264

Next Review: 2028