

SIBFORD FERRIS PARISH COUNCIL

Social Media

This paper aims to give sufficient information for the parish council to decide whether to set up a parish council Facebook page and if so how it should be managed.

What are social media?

"Social media are easy ways to create, share and communicate on the internet."
(OALC¹)

This covers applications such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, Snapchat and WhatsApp. This list is approximately in order of popularity; worldwide², Facebook has nearly twice as many users as YouTube and six times as many as Twitter. If the figures are to be believed, 1 in every 4 people in the world has a Facebook account.

YouTube, Instagram and Flickr are mainly about sharing images rather than textual information.

In practice, most parish councils who are using social media use Facebook, even if they use other applications as well. The rest of this paper assumes that we are talking solely about Facebook, at least to begin with.

There is already one Facebook page associated with the Sibfords – *Sibford Hall Promotions*, which provides information about fund-raising events for the village hall.

Why use social media?

A useful way to think about a Facebook page is as an online notice board for local residents. Unlike a website, which tends to be a repository for fixed or slowly changing information, and requiring some training or expertise to keep up to date, Facebook focuses on recent events and makes it easy for anyone to contribute and comment, and to share content with their friends.

While few people take the trouble to check a village website every day, the typical Facebook user will logon at least once per day to keep in touch with a wide variety of friends, relatives and pages of interest. A village Facebook page provides the parish council with an opportunity to communicate with a good proportion of residents in a timely manner with little effort on either side, more effectively than either the traditional notice board or the website.

In contrast to a traditional notice board or website, Facebook provides an opportunity for people to give feedback on notices and events. There are risks in allowing the public to contribute content, but Facebook provides ways of managing these.

Increasingly, people expect to be able to communicate with their local council via social media.

What are the costs?

A Facebook page is free of charge, but keeping it up to date and responding to comments in a timely fashion will require diligent effort from one or more people, who may or may not need to be paid.

What are the risks?

1. Too little useful information, too late: To be credible, the Facebook page needs to be regularly updated with factual and interesting information.
2. Too much repetitive information, too frequently: The opposite problem that could cause people to “unfriend” the page and ignore it in future.
3. Rude, offensive or defamatory posts and comments from the public: This can be managed by moderating content, so that nothing gets published on the site until approved by an administrator. It is not possible to prevent people commenting on posts, but comments can be filtered for profanity and can also be hidden or deleted. This is the main reason why it is important to monitor the page on a regular basis, preferably at least daily. It is possible to ban persistent offenders from posting or commenting.
4. Too few followers to justify the additional work: Facebook provides statistics of usage, so this is a judgement that can be made after a period of use.

Best practice

OALC¹ advise:

- Do not get involved in protracted public debate on the Facebook page; better to direct people to official channels for commenting or complaining.
- Publish facts, not opinion. Do not publish personal data or anything received in confidence. Respect copyright.
- Do not publish anything that may suggest that councillors do not have an open mind about a matter that they will be determining.
- Author posts and comments as (for example) “Sibford Ferris PC” rather than under an individual’s own name.
- Make it clear that the Facebook page is not an official channel for communicating to the Parish Council. Reply to posts and comments by advising authors of the appropriate channel. State, for example, that comments on planning applications and local issues will not be taken into account unless communicated in writing or email.
- Be clear about the response time that people may expect; for example that we only respond during normal office hours.
- Check that the council’s insurance policy covers libel and slander, and with what conditions or exceptions. In law, the council is usually not considered responsible for defamatory comments posted on its website or social media by someone else, provided that the original author can be identified and that the comments are removed promptly when asked.

- If you are pondering on whether some item is suitable for posting, it isn't.

What decisions are needed?

1. Should the parish council use social media?
2. Which social media?
3. Should a Facebook page be for Sibford Ferris PC, or for The Sibfords in general?
4. What sort of material will the PC post?
5. Who will post to it for the PC?
6. Who will respond to comments on behalf of the PC?

A proposal

My proposed answers to the above questions:

It is at least worth trialling a Facebook page. It should aim to be for the Sibfords as a whole, because separate pages for the parish councils would be confusing, repetitive and needlessly divisive. The owner of the existing Sibford Hall Promotions page has suggested that this could be rolled into a village page. The name *Sibford Village Green* appeals to me, since the Sibfords don't have a green in real space. Note, however, that there is nothing to stop anyone else from setting up other village-associated pages.

Use the page for publishing:

- By the two parish clerks (or delegated administrators, or perhaps fed automatically from the village website):
 - Notices of parish council meetings and planning applications
 - Minutes of council meetings and key decisions
 - Notices from Cherwell DC and other public bodies that the parish council has been asked to publicise
 - Timely factual information about current issues (eg housing, broadband)
- By The Sibfords website webmaster:
 - Village events – broadly those that are publicised in the "Don't miss" column of the village website
- By the public:
 - Local issues and events likely to be of interest to Sibford residents
 - Notices typical of the village notice board, such as: lost and found; items for sale and wanted; services offered by local tradesmen and businesses
 - Local warnings: current traffic problems, suspicious visitors
 - Local clubs and classes.

I suggest that "local" would mean a radius of 7 miles from the village: chosen to exclude Banbury, Chippy, and Shipston. It would be best to publish the criteria that are

used to deem something suitable for publishing, and these would need to be reviewed periodically in the light of actual usage.

At least two administrators will be appointed to manage the page. They would need to work out some way of sharing the moderation workload. I have not had time to canvass possible candidates, but I think it would be possible to get things going without imposing an additional workload on the parish clerks. We would need to check what is needed to ensure that the administrators are covered for this by parish council insurance.

Posts and comments by an administrator will show as authored by "The Sibfords"; those by the public will show the author's name. Posts by the public must be approved by an administrator before being published.

The Facebook page would be set up, populated quietly for a few weeks, and the experience reviewed by the Parish Council, before being made generally known.

Tim Huckvale

References

1. OALC training course *Social Media for Councils*, <http://www.oalc.org.uk/events.htm>
2. Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites, <https://www.dreamgrow.com/top-15-most-popular-social-networking-sites/>
3. Sample village and parish council Facebook pages:
 - <https://www.facebook.com/brailes/>
 - <https://www.facebook.com/CaversfieldParish/>
 - <https://www.facebook.com/ChinnorParishCouncil/>
 - <https://www.facebook.com/hooknorton/>
 - <https://www.facebook.com/Swalcliffe-village-page-1418387438427415/>