

Rationale for the Board of Directors' Social Media Proposal

Some months ago, the Board agreed that the problems posed by some social media posts were such that a robust policy should be put in place. This would:

- Make GCCF's stance on the misuse of social media clear to all stakeholders.
- Link in with the GCCF Disciplinary system to give redress to individuals, clubs or affiliated organisations that are the subject of damaging social media posts.
- Protect GCCF's reputation and good name when it may be potentially damaged by social media posts.

To meet these aims, the Board considered adopting The Kennel Club social media policy, which has now been proposed by the Southern & South Western Birman Cat Club. However, the Board agreed that the Kennel Club policy offers only guidelines, without providing a clear rule. Indeed, the Kennel Club (and by extension S&SWBCC) policy explicitly washes its hands of taking disciplinary action against offenders, instead referring those affected to criminal and civil legal recourse. This would not offer the protection the Board seeks for GCCF, its stakeholders, and most importantly individuals, a number of whom have expressed concern and asked that something should be done.

Three recent instances illustrate the need for a robust code:

- An international Facebook group discussed the prevalence of a potentially fatal inherited condition in a breed. Some UK breeders opined that most of the breed in the UK carried the gene, and blamed the breed club, BAC and one breeder in particular for the situation. The posts became personal when some UK contributors suggested that it would be better if the breeder died. Offensive to the breeder, and damaging to the breed in the UK, but the police/civil courts would not be interested.
- After a Judge withheld a CC on a cat, its owner posted a photo of it on Facebook, and appealed to their "friends" to agree the cat was worth a CC. Following a second Judge's view that the cat's Judge needed spectacles, the posts became increasingly offensive and some were aggressive. A third Judge then cast aspersions in offensive terms on the withholding Judge's ability to judge. As well as its malice towards the Judge who withheld the CC, this exchange was potentially damaging to the reputation of GCCF Judges in general. The civil courts or police would not have been interested.
- Following the February 2015 Council meeting, some members of a Facebook group exulted in their success in opposing structural changes to GCCF. They criticised the Chairman's style – **this would not be a breach of the proposed Social Media Code** – then one contributor went on to accuse the Chairman of lying about the costs of his trip to the WCC. This was libellous and, had the Chairman wished, he could have made a civil complaint about it. However, as a low-level offence - albeit damaging personally and, by extension, to GCCF – it would have been better dealt with by the Disciplinary Committee, if the Chairman wished to complain.

The S&SWBCC has exposed some misconceptions about the Board's proposed policy. The Board WILL NOT be spying on social media to catch people out, neither will it be involved if any complaint is made. The standard practice will be followed of referring these to IC. The proposed policy allows IC to monitor [ie, look at], intercept [ie, take screenshots] and review [ie, analyse to assess whether or not they breach the policy] and what penalty, if any, should be applied.

It is Council, not the Board, that appoints IC, and it should be noted that for the first time delegates and club committees will be able to assess the qualities of applicants for this important GCCF Committee well in advance of the election. Anyone bound by GCCF rules could apply this year and careful consideration should be given to their relevant background, qualifications and experience.

Additionally, there are significant legal exceptions to the right to freedom of speech quoted by the proposal's detractors. These include using threatening, abusive or insulting words intending or likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress, or sending another any article which is indecent or grossly offensive with an intent to cause distress or anxiety. In effect personal abuse via social media is another form of bullying and Council has agreed 'unacceptable and aggressive behaviour' should not be tolerated (rule 4:30).

GCCF does not need internet trolls and bullies, and there should be provision for action against them to be taken when necessary without recourse to legal expenses. The Board's proposal allows this.