

Southern & South Western Birman Cat Club Proposal re Social Media

RATIONALE FOR THE GCCF GIVING POSITIVE GUIDANCE ON THE SENSIBLE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- The GCCF no longer has the monopoly regarding the registration and showing of cats, but with its mantra of “Giving Cats Care Forever” should be a body that engages with people, encouraging, advising and educating them to enrich their enjoyment of and commitment to their hobby.
- The GCCF does not have the facilities to “monitor, intercept and review, without further notice, social media postings and activities that include references to it, and/or its associates, to ensure that its Codes of Practice are being complied with and for legitimate business purposes” with the unfortunate outcome, the system would become selective, personal and undemocratic. In the opinion of the Committee and members of the Southern & South Western Birman Cat Club C2043 Item 4 is an unworkable proposal.
- Our alternative proposal offers sensible and constructive advice in a positive manner on matters regarding the use of Social Media in line with the Crown Prosecution Service Guidelines and similar to that offered by the Kennel Club in September 2014.

GCCF AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy believes Social Media is an excellent forum for circulating News, Notices and Information to a huge number of people virtually instantly. Our GCCF page on Facebook has proved extremely successful in this role, regularly receiving many hits.

However, there are also a great many pages and groups to be found on social media where discussions involving showing, judging and owning cats by people who are involved within the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy can become negative and destructive. The GCCF has been made aware, on several occasions, of conversations held on public internet forums which sometimes include ill-informed or even untrue criticism of the GCCF; of cats bred, owned or shown; strongly worded disputes between breeders and/or owners; harsh criticism of judges and judging from exhibitors and/or other judges and in some extreme cases, serious threats have been made against individuals. This behaviour is clearly unacceptable.

The GCCF is unable to intervene in the majority of such cases and so issues the following guidance, intended to provide advice to people who have been the subject of such allegations and criticism; to those who have been involved in such discussions and also to give direction on when the GCCF may or may not become involved or intervene.

1. DISCUSSIONS AND COMMENTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA CONVERSATIONS

- All participants in these discussions and comments should realise their words may be screen printed and circulated, so that even if a remark is made that is later regretted and deleted, it may have already been copied, saved and circulated by someone with an agenda.
- People indulging in careless, uninhibited and ill-considered comments and/or criticism on social media aimed at judges, cats, fellow club members, exhibitors or “friends”, should consider very carefully the impact their remarks may have. Rude and disparaging remarks on Facebook and other forums are never acceptable and can prove offensive, hurtful or deeply distressing. Damaging people’s reputations or making unfounded remarks about their cats or their judging may also be a matter for legal action.
- Freedom of expression and opinion is, of course, a right that has been entrenched in UK society for centuries. Institutions and prominent figures may be criticised or satirised and GCCF has accepted this fact since its foundation, however unpalatable it may be. Many may still recall some stringent “Letters to the Editor” in *Fur and Feather*, later *Our Cats*, but, in the twenty first century, comments on social media reach a far wider audience. Criticism and comments should always be made in the context of normal and civil behaviour. If you have something worthwhile to say in a social media discussion, then it should be constructive criticism with the facts checked in advance and it should never be couched in an offensive manner. Some comments, which could be interpreted as cyber bullying, are totally out of place and could result in legal action.
- GCCF Judges and Officers should take great care when joining in such conversations since it is not acceptable for them to criticise fellow judges’ or colleagues’ decisions in a disparaging way. GCCF Judges, Officers and Board Members should keep a distance from contentious issues and maintain an independent and private view. Remember there is a perception of public confidence and general respect for those involved at a senior level in any aspect of the Fancy.

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2. ADVICE TO THOSE READING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

- Anyone finding themselves, their cats or their work for GCCF targeted, or the subject of disparaging remarks in social media conversations is advised to ignore the material and not to read, circulate, respond or engage in the discussion. The law is intended to offer protection from the more extreme material.
- Social Media conversations are usually a matter of opinion. On occasions an expression of anger or frustration is made that is not based on verified fact. Rude, spiteful and ill-informed comments say more about those writing them than about those whom they seek to criticise. In extreme cases of direct threat or harassment, then the police or a solicitor should be contacted.
- The Crown Prosecution Service has issued guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent by social media which can be found at www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/
- It is sensible to take the approach that there must be something more than *“the expression of unpopular opinion about serious or trivial matters, banter or humour even if distasteful to some and/or painful to those subjected to it”* before legal intervention is possible. The GCCF therefore has to apply a similar approach and policy and is unable to intervene in the majority of cases.
- The GCCF advises it is better not to read, engage or respond to questionable material on Social Media. Sometimes it is better to allow those who choose to air their views on these channels the freedom to do so, even if they do not do so in an adult and mature fashion. Those who do read such postings should treat the content, particularly if unduly critical or of a rude, disparaging nature, with caution. They should not make any judgment or assume the truth or foundation of the comments on the basis of what is written. Social media content should generally be treated as gossip and not a validated or reliable source of information unless posted on a reputable site as information from an administrator.
- If you feel you have to join in these discussions, be informed and be polite; if you have to read the content, do not assume what is said is true and if you are the subject of gossip or rumour then treat it for what it is. Always remember that the most effective and practical way to deal with offensive material is not to participate or respond.

3. GENERAL ADVICE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USERS:

- You are responsible for what you post since it is a public medium.
- Always maintain privacy and never post confidential information on social media.
- Do not discuss a situation involving named or pictured individuals without their permission.
- If the content of your message would not be acceptable for a face to face conversation or discussion, a telephone call or correspondence through any other medium, then it is not acceptable for sharing on a social networking site.
- Think before you post! If you feel angry or passionate about a subject, it is wise to delay commenting until you are calm and clear headed. There is no such thing as a ‘private’ social media site, even if you delete a post.
- Be aware of liability: You are responsible for what you post on your own site and on the sites of others. Individual bloggers could be held liable for commentary deemed to be libellous, obscene or which infringes copyright.

4. THE GCCFs ROLE

- The GCCFs jurisdiction lies primarily with the enforcement of its Bye-Laws, Rules & Regulations, issues arising out of registrations and incidents occurring at GCCF licensed events and shows. It does not have the facilities, remit or authority to censor material on the internet, nor to censure those involved and is therefore unable to intervene directly in the majority of cases.
- For those affected by material on social media, there are ways to deal with the extreme versions of offensive material online including complaints for defamation, harassment or sending malicious correspondence. These are criminal or civil offences and forum moderators are usually (or should be) swift to respond and remove content that has no place being published.
- Extreme cases of threat or bullying should be reported to the legal authorities.