

MESSINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1. Introduction

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors, employees and volunteers with an overview of Social Media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officer and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

2. Definition of Social Media

Social media is a term for the electronic sharing of opinions, discussions, stories, video, pictures, information and even gossip.

It can be categorised into six types: blogs; wikis; social networks; forums; podcasts; and content communities. The key feature of such systems is that they can be accessed in different ways – via computers, tablets and phones.

Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, You Tube, Pinterest, Snap chat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Linked In and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

Social media has the following characteristics;

- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of device; PCs, phones and tablets (e.g. iPad)
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
- Communication takes place in real time or intermittently

3. Potential Pitfalls

Whilst these tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are some downsides to be aware of;

- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. In many cases registration to view the content may not be necessary. Registering is only required should you wish to participate and post to the site.
- Groups on specific themes can be set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately and it is all too easy to respond without thinking and potentially inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience.
- It is very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

4. Council use of Social Media

Social media provides the Parish Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience instantaneously on a range of issues relating to the activities of the Council eg. updates, news, information and sharing relevant information from other agencies. It also provides the opportunity to communicate with the younger age group, the business community and harder to reach groups.

5. Individual Councillor Usage

Councillors are at liberty to set up their accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. Members of the Council should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature.

Councillors need to think about whether they are acting in a private capacity, or whether any impression might be conveyed that they are acting for and on behalf of Messingham Parish Council.

Councillors are reminded that the Council's adopted Code of Conduct also applies to any on-line activity.

6. Aims and Objectives

Social media can be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this policy is to ensure;

- Engagement with individuals and communities and the successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
- That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

7. Policy Statement

It is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to Officers and Councillors.

This policy provides a structured approach to using social media to ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise the Council's information or computer systems/networks.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Messingham Parish Council;

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in this policy
- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- Never give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with Council policy and the Data Protection Act/General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) 2018
- Use of the Parish Council's accounts must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be to reflect personal opinion, particularly when used by a Councillor.

- When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council. Avoid use of the council e-mail address, logos or other council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as "*Statements and opinions expressed are my own and don't necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions*".
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other council policies when using social media. For example, you should be careful not to breach council confidentiality and proprietary information policies. For members this could be a Code of Conduct issue and for employees it could be a disciplinary matter.
- Comments that are knowingly unlawful, defamatory, obscene, profane, proprietary, or libellous should not be made. Care should be taken to avoid exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterisations
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and its employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong and can have repercussions.
- Handle complex queries by other channels
- Social media should not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising

8. Responsibilities

The Parish clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of any Social Media channels agreed by the Council. A Councillor elected by the Parish Council may assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information should the Clerk not be available to respond. However all must ensure they follow this policy. New social media accounts in the Council's name must not be created unless authorised by the Council. No account details may be changed without the permission of the clerk.

9. Social media at meetings

The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of local issues and the use of social media can help with this. Councillors will wish to bear in mind the purpose of council meetings and the expectations of the public in terms of their representatives attentively listening to and participating in debates and decision-making.

Below are some further guidelines for councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted for use during meetings however the use of such devices should have the intention to improve communication not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part;
- Councillors' tweets/blogs during council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting;
- Councillors have a responsibility to take council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. The public attending meetings expect debate and to be informed about council business, not to witness petty arguments;
- If a councillor breaks the law whilst using social media (for example by posting something defamatory), they will be personally responsible.

10. Facebook Strategy

Facebook offers a platform allowing the council to share content, including images and videos.

Example activity includes:

- Share articles / blog posts / expertise
- Advertise events and activities
- Share information eg. from Principal Authorities/Community groups
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction

- Create surveys to encourage participation from visitors
- Upload product images and videos
- Competitions
- Generic news – what’s happening in the area

One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “friend” others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Care should be exercised when accepting invitations to friend others within personal social networking sites. Friends will gain access to the Council’s network of contacts on the site.

Councillors can set up their own Facebook pages, but in doing so they will accept sole responsibility for the maintenance of those pages and will be personally responsible for ensuring that it complies with legislation.

Good practice guidelines for the use of Facebook by the Council as a body or Councillors as individuals are;

- A Parish Council has a professional image to uphold and how it communicates electronically impacts this image
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realising that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise council policies or personnel
- Ensure the profile’s security and privacy settings are set carefully. At a minimum, all privacy settings should be set to “only friends”. “Friends of friends” and “Networks and Friends” open the content to a large group of unknown people
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission
- Pay close attention to the site’s security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site
- Only add “official” council statements after they have been approved by either the Full Council a committee or the Parish Clerk
- Acknowledge queries posted to the Parish Council on the Facebook site publicly but respond privately in message form
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, profane, proprietary, or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterisations
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts the effectiveness as a Council at risk
- To reduce security risks, do not install any external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page
- If you find information, on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law
- Stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

11. **Twitter Strategy**

Twitter is a ‘microblogging’ platform which allows users to post short messages and converse with other users. Unlike email or text messaging, these conversations take place in the open and engage audiences in discussions about services, products and issues– connecting a vast amount of likeminded people in an often targeted and purposeful way.

Example activity:

- Share relevant articles / blog posts / expertise
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Link to Facebook content / surveys / pictures / videos
- Follow and participate in discussions with other related tweeters
- Comment on tweets and re-tweet other posts to build community
- Offer relevant Q&A sessions

People following a Council could expect tweets covering some or all of the following:

- Updates on Council activities
- Announcements about matters of importance to residents and those who may be visiting or moving to the parish
- Requests for information and assistance including invitations to tender for Council services
- News about our online facilities
- Re-tweets from organisations that we are following which meet our Twitter Policy

Those “following” a Council on Twitter it will not automatically follow the person back and the right is reserved to block that person from following a Council. Being followed by a Council does not imply endorsement of any kind.

Councils are unable to monitor Twitter round the clock. However it should endeavour to answer all sensible tweeted questions but due to privacy, it may not be possible to answer all tweet questions.

Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts. Key questions when tweeting are;

- What do the readers really want to know?
- When do they need to know it?
- Why is the information you’re sharing relevant?
- Am I the most appropriate person to be responding to queries/commenting on tweets if it is a Parish Council-related matter?

Content should be valuable. Negative comments should only be responded to with factual information and on-line arguments must always be avoided.

12. Blog Strategy:

Blogs form the backbone to most social content. They provide the perfect opportunity to share relevant content. Example activity:

- Deliver a weekly blog post – a mix of advice, council news and guides
- Include imagery
- Encourage comments – ask the reader questions or for their opinion on the subject
- Share with social media audience

Given the amount of time required to populate and maintain a blog Councils may struggle with this approach. Councillors are at liberty to create their own personal blog sites however they should be made aware that the software platform used for the web site, Wordpress, can be used to blog and therefore could be used to allow comments to be made about certain articles that appear on the web site. The default should always be to switch off comments.

13. Other Social Media

This policy will be reviewed as forms of social media are adopted.

Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media they wish but must abide by this policy at all times when so doing.

14. Breach of this policy

- Failure to comply with this Policy by councillors will be deemed as a breach of the Members Code of Conduct and will be reported to the Monitoring Officer.
- Other violations, such as breaching the Data Protection Act 2018 could lead to criminal or civil action being taken against the individual(s) involved.
- The Council reserves the right to request the closure of any applications or removal of any content published by employees and councillors deemed inappropriate, or which may adversely affect the reputation of the Council, or put it at risk of legal action.
- Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against you or the Council.
- Employees should be aware that where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against under the Disciplinary Procedure.

Policy Adopted: 8th July 2019
Last Reviewed: 13 May 2024 Minute ref. 1800 11k)
Next Review Date: May 2025