

WATERBEACH PARISH COUNCIL

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

1. INTRODUCTION

This guidance is intended to help Councillors and Council staff to make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites.

The Council will encourage the use of social media for the purpose of:

- Providing and exchanging information about our services
- Supporting local democracy
- Gathering residents' insights and managing relationships
- Promoting cultural and community events for the area
- Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- Creating internal communications, learning and development

This guidance outlines the standards the Council expects Councillors and staff to observe when using social media and the circumstances in which the Council will monitor and follow up on the use of social media.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with Council policies and procedures such as the Equal Opportunities Policy, Disciplinary Procedures, Members Code of Conduct and such like. It does not form part of any contract of employment and may be amended at any time.

It should be read by individuals working at all levels within the Council, including all elected Councillors, co-opted Councillors (if any), the Clerk to the Council and all other employees and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff).

2. Scope

2.1 The Council has a corporate presence on the web and in the use of email.

2.2 Over time the Parish Council may add to the channels of communication it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, the guidance will be updated to reflect the new arrangements that it uses to communicate with people who live in, work in and visit the Parish. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.

2.3 All members and staff are expected to observe the guidance to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality and interests of the Council, its services, employees, partners and community.

2.4 The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by the employee.

2.5 Unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by volunteers may result in the Council no longer using their services and if necessary, further action will be taken.

2.6 Behaviour required by the Members' Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Members should bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply.

3.8 Remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person but posting them on the Internet means that they have been published in a way that cannot be contained.

3.9 Online content should be objective, balanced, informed and accurate.

3.10 Members should be aware that their profile as Councillor means the more likely it is that they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking.

3.11 It should be remembered that communications on the Internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the Council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

4. Guidelines for Using Social Media

4.1 Staff and Councillors should not allow their interaction on any websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others. They should not make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory or offensive comments about other staff, Councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies that the Council works with and serves.

4.2 Posts should not contain anyone's personal information other than necessary basic contact details.

4.3 If staff or Councillors blog or tweet personally and not in their role as a Councillor, they should not act, claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council. They should not include web links to official Council websites as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council.

4.4 All staff and Councillors should ensure that they use Council facilities appropriately. If using a Council provided website, blog site or social networking area, any posts will be viewed as made in an official capacity. Do not use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.

4.5 The Parish Clerk as moderator will be responsible for posting and monitoring the content on Council pages. The moderator has authority to immediately without notice or comment, remove any posts from the Council's social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts will also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook) and recorded in Council records.

4.6 Staff and individual parish councillors are responsible for what they post. They are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published email address which is used for Council business. Both staff and councillors are strongly advised to have separate council and personal email addresses.

4.7 All social media sites in use should be checked on a regular basis to ensure that the security settings are in place.

4.8 When participating in online communication, staff and councillors should:

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council
- Never make false or misleading statements
- Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They should protect the good reputation of the Council
- Be mindful of the information posted on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud' (e.g by using capital letters or writing in red)
- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents
- Seek permission to publish original photographs or video from the persons or organisations in the video or photographs before they are uploaded. You must check that there is parental permission before photos of children are used
- Never post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations such as libel and copyright
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- Not post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- Use sentence case format (except for Twitter posts)
- Spell and grammar check everything
- Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief should not be published on any social media site

4.9 At any meeting of the Council or any of its committees, the following persons should sit in a separate area, although they may be included in a panning or panoramic shot:

- any members of the public who do not wish to participate in the meeting and who object to being filmed, recorded, photographed or otherwise reported about
- children and vulnerable adults where the relevant responsible adult has not given consent for them to be filmed, recorded, photographed or otherwise reported about.

4.10 Residents and Councillors should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

4.11 If a matter that is raised in any form on social media needs further consideration by the Council, it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. Again, the 'poster' shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case and invited to contact the Clerk directly. Any response agreed by the Council should be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

4.12 Reports of any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should be reported to the Clerk for referral as required.