

## Newton-with-Clifton parish council Social media policy

**Introduction/overarching aims.** The use of digital and social media has an impact on all areas of local government, enabling more direct contact between the council and the people and organisations. Council recognise that for some residents, accessing information via social media platforms is their preferred option. While there are too many social sites to include all of them, the council will endeavour to use those which are most widely used, and review as required the type and number of social media sites used. Social media policy aims to describe how council will use social media to improve and expand the ways in which it communicates with its local residents, local businesses, and various government (local and central) agencies. Social media sites will be used to support other communications issued by council, and will help provide a consistent message across all media formats. The policy sets out what is and is not acceptable usage of social media and complements the general rules in the Code of Conduct for councillors in pursuance of strengthening the focus on professional, responsible, and respectful interactions.

### **Scope.**

Social media describes a range of websites and online tools which allow people to interact. This includes blogs and postings on a wide range of platforms including, but not limited to, Facebook, X (Twitter), Linked-In, Instagram and Snapchat. Social media is all about sharing information and to give opinions, create interest groups and to build online communities and network which encourage participation and engagement. This policy relates to any social media communication published by or on behalf of the council or any individual in their capacity as a councillor.

**Key Principles.** Any communication is capable of being misinterpreted. The immediacy of social media and the lack of face-to-face contact can magnify any problem. Information and comments made can be broadcast to a large number of people more quickly than other media. The same rules apply to social media that govern other behaviour as a councillor - but extra care needs to be taken given the immediacy and ease of dissemination. Although social media is conversational in tone, it is recorded, and it is permanent, so content and comment must be accurate, informative, and thought through.

**Responsibilities and accountabilities.** Council will appoint annually two nominated members as moderators. They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of all content on council social media sites ensuring it complies with the policy. The moderators have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from social media pages which are deemed to be defamatory, libellous in nature or are otherwise deemed to be inappropriate. Such posts will be reported to the clerk and may also be reported to the hosts (e.g. Facebook) and police. Council will appoint a nominated “Webmaster” to maintain and update its website. The clerk is responsible for all formal communication between the council and members of the public.

**Use of social media.** Social media communications from the council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil and relevant.
- Not contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, or racially offensive.
- Not contain content copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright.
- Not contain any personal information, other than required basic contact details.

It is not a requirement for councillors to have a personal Facebook or Twitter account or to use other forms of social media to engage with parishioners or otherwise fulfil their role.

Councillors should always spell out clearly whether they are communicating on social media in their capacity as a councillor or as a private individual. Councillors are encouraged to create specific social media accounts for their work as councillors, although this remains a personal choice. Councillors should ensure that they comply with the Code of Conduct for Councillors whenever they act or appear to act in an official capacity on social media in the same way as with any other form of communication.

Whilst independent communications with parishioners are important in order to engage and be approachable, the overarching rules are that councillors should not make commitments on behalf of the council, not bring the council into disrepute, and always respect confidentiality.

### **Social media guidelines.**

- Treat others with respect - do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful, or offensive comments.
- Comply with equality laws - do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.
- Never bully or harass anyone - do not say anything, that might be construed as bullying or intimidation.
- Do not bring the council into disrepute - do not publish anything that could reasonably be perceived as reflecting badly upon or lowering the reputation of the council.
- Do not disclose confidential information - do not disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone, or information acquired by you which you believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature.
- Consider keeping your personal and councillor profile on social networking sites separate.
- Check you have the appropriate privacy settings for any private blog or networking site.
- Be aware that you will be seen as acting in your official capacity if you publish information that you could only have accessed by being a councillor.

### **Potential legal issues.**

**Libel** - If an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation is published, they may consider it as defamatory and consider legal action.

**Copyright** - Using images or text on social media from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos), without obtaining permission, is likely to breach copyright laws.

**Data Protection** - Personal data of individuals must not be published unless you have their express permission. Personal information in an email or personal exchange should not be presumed to imply any consent to pass it on to others.

**Bias and Predetermination** - Councillors should not say anything on social media (or indeed anywhere) that suggests they have made up their mind on an issue that is due to be formally decided. While a member's likely view on a particular application may be well known, it is necessary to be able to show that when attending a committee or council meeting or hearing a member is prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence, and was genuinely persuadable to a different view, or the decision may be later challenged as invalid.

It is the intention of council that its Facebook pages will provide timely information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within the parish and a vehicle for constructive comments & suggestions from residents and local organisations. This would also be the case for a X(Twitter) and, to a lesser extent, any Instagram or similar account.

In order to ensure that all discussions on the council page are productive, respectful, and consistent with the councils mission and goals, contributors must follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats, or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the council Facebook page for commercial purposes or to market products.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the council for official purposes and the council is not obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through the Facebook channel.

Council will remove any comment or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright.
- Private, personal information published without consent.

- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam

Any councillor failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy may find themselves in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct and subject to a complaint to the Monitoring Officer. Any officer failing to follow the guidance set out in this policy could face disciplinary action.

**Publicity during elections.** There are specific rules governing publicity when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, all publicity about candidates is halted. During this period, all council publicity shall be managed by the clerk as the proper officer of the council.

Approved: 30th May 2024

Frank Wilson  
Clerk  
30th May 2024