



Chiseldon Parish Council

Communications and Social Media Policy

Background

Social Media sites are being used more and more as a means of communication. While this can be a very effective way of communicating it does have inherent pitfalls which could result in consequences for the both the individual and the Council.

This policy is intended ensure that Councillors and Staff are fully aware of the benefits and pitfalls of commenting on any social media site. To put in place an agreed policy and procedure which will protect and provide guidance to all involved in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Council Website
- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Parish Council Emails

The principles of this Policy apply equally to Councillors and Staff and is also intended to give guidance for others wishing to communicate with the Council by social media channels. The policy needs to be taken into consideration with relevant existing polices.

No direct costs will be incurred by implementing it. It will be updated as necessary by the Clerk in conjunction with Council.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What you write on the web is permanent.

In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters, see further notes below.

There is a one sheet Pocket Guide to the things to be aware of when using social media attached as a separate page at the end of the document. This must be read in conjunction with the main document for the full policy requirement.

General

1. The Clerk will act as moderator with the responsibility for monitoring the content of the Council's website and any social media channels the Council chose to use



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ensuring it complies with the Council's policies. The moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libel nature. Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and also the Full Council.

2. Council office staff under the management of the Clerk will act as nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Council Website, in conjunction with our website content management company.

The social media may be used to

- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Good news stories linked website or press page
- Vacancies
- Retweeting or 'share' information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.
- Announcing new information.
- Post or Share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups
- Refer resident queries to the clerk and all other Councillors

Facebook will be used to support the website information above. Emails will be used to distribute information of council business.

Individual Councillors are responsible for what they post, when posting as a resident. They should not post as a Cllr. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used for council business. Councillors are strongly advised to have separate council and personal email addresses.

Code of Practice

Guidance when using social media (including email).

3. All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place.
4. When participating in any online communication remember:
 - a) Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
 - b) Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council. Never make false or misleading statements.



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- c) Councillors and Staff should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council or likely to bring the Council into disrepute or are contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
 - d) Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, not capital letters nor write in red to emphasis points.
 - e) Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
 - f) Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
 - g) Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
 - h) Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
5. Respect the privacy of Councillors and Staff.
6. Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, see below libel and copyright.
7. Councillors and Staff should note that not all communication requires a response.
- a. Some communication will not require an immediate response as they may need to be discussed and agreed by the Clerk or by an appropriate Council meeting. Any delay to a response will need to be advised to the person sending the query with a suitable holding reply.
 - b. If the receiver of a message feels unable to answer a post, for example of a contentious nature, this shall be referred to the Clerk. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Clerk directly.
 - c. Any communication from residents and other third parties which need to be discussed at a Council meeting will be raised at the next available meeting. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.
 - d. The Clerk will be responsible for all final published responses on the Council's website and social media channels.
8. The Clerk acting as moderator shall remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libelous or defamatory information without further comment or notification.
- a. Spell and grammar check everything.
 - b. Correct any errors promptly.



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9. Councillors or Staff who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.
10. The Policy will be reviewed annually.

Additional information

Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you can result in an award of damages against you.

Copyright

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

Obscene material

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website.

Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/ candidates-and-](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-)



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agents

The Council's legal position

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular Councillor, promote an individual Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Members' Code of Conduct

Councillors can have 'blurred identities, you may have a social media account where you comment both as a Councillor and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a Councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is the need to get social media accounts/ profiles clear, to be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing the Parish Council.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the council, for example blogging as a Councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a Councillor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a Councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most Councillors are using their online profile to communicate with residents about representing their local area so engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role.

Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.



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Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their council, local police service or Councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some Councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you. Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way. And bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance.

Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake; perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

Pocket Guide to using social media

Social Media sites are being used more and more as a means of communication. While this can be a very effective way of communicating it does have inherent pitfalls which could result in consequences for the both the individual and the Council.

Important things to know

1. Most social media sites will have a profile page which shows details that will enable people identify you. You can decide how much or little information you share and who can see the page. Privacy settings are important and if not used, anyone can see your posts.
2. **Anything posted on the internet is there forever** under current legislation. Even if you delete a post, it will always be there in the background.
3. It is possible that, even if you do not mention it, **many people will know that you are a Councillor**. This could mean that your personal view could be construed as that of whole Council.
4. Use of Community sites or comments on people's social media pages can result in misunderstanding in the same manner as above. This can also result in long exchanges.
5. Social Media fast and powerful way of giving information.
6. The Council will use Social Media only to give and/or share actual information such as local events, appeals for views or information and details of actions already agreed by the Council. Anything posted will be controlled by the office.



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7. Councillors who have a social media page should set their privacy setting so that only their friends and followers can view their posts.
8. Councillors making statements or giving a view on any aspect of Council or Government business on any website or social media site must make it clear that they are making a personal statement by adding a prefix to their statement such as “This is my personal view...” or “this is my personal opinion..”. Mention of Chiseldon Parish Council must not be made.
9. Engaging in conversation about Council business should be avoided in all circumstances.
10. All posts about Council business should go through the Chiseldon Parish Council Clerk. (These may be shared on your personal pages once agreed).
11. If a statement about Chiseldon Parish Council appears on any community or group site, the only response from any Councillor should be “Chiseldon Parish Council welcomes your feedback and will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Please contact clerk@chiseldon-pc.gov.uk or visit our website www.chiseldon-pc.gov.uk for details of our meetings which are all open to members of the public”.

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