



## Social Media Policy for Councillors

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## **Introduction**

Social media is the term used for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This policy and guidelines cover social media issues over the internet and by email, smart phones, social networking sites, blogging, and tweeting.

Social media increases our access to audiences and improves the accessibility of our communication. It enables us to be more active in our relationships with citizens, partners and stakeholders and encourages people to be involved in local decision making, enabling better engagement and feedback, ultimately helping to improve the services we provide.

For the purposes of this policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where Selston Parish Council could be represented via online participation.

Selston Parish Council acknowledges social media as a useful tool however, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that their use does not expose the council to security risks, reputational damage or breach the Data Protection Act.

## **Purpose**

This policy applies to councillors. It gives guidelines on how to use social media, sets out how we can effectively manage social media usage and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated. The following risks have been identified with social media use (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Damage to the council's reputation.
- Social engineering attacks (also known as 'phishing').
- Bullying or "trolling". An internet "troll" is a person who starts arguments or upsets people, by posting inflammatory or off-topic messages online with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal discussion, often for their own amusement.
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.
- Breach of the code of conduct for members through inappropriate use.

In light of these risks, the use of social media sites should be regulated to ensure that such use does not damage the council, its employees, councillors, partners and the people it serves. As such this policy aims to ensure:

- A consistent and corporate approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media.
- Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media.
- Users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation.
- The council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

## **Policy Statement**

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

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with corporate policy. They must ensure that their 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.

## **Responsibilities of Councillors**

You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media. Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a libel action.

Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

Make use of stringent privacy settings if you don't want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality/privacy settings.

Do not disclose personal details such as home addresses and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the council's Data protection policy.

Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business – if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.

Do not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public are present or it is of a confidential nature) or exempt reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985). Use of social media in meetings must comply with the protocol for the use of recording devices during any meeting held under the auspices of Selston Parish Council.

Copyright laws still apply online. Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g. extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about or seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.

Don't send or post inappropriate, abusive, bullying, racist or defamatory messages to members of the public, other councillors or officers either in or outside the work environment.

The council will not promote councillors' social media accounts during the pre-election period.

In any biography, the account should state the views are those of the councillor in question and may not represent the views of the council.

**Do not use the council's logo, or any other council related material on a personal account or website.**

Social media must not be used for actions that would put councillors in breach of the council's Code of conduct for members. For example, don't publish on social media something you wouldn't say face to face, or at a public meeting.

Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.

Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, members' services and/or the police.

It is recommended that in the case of Facebook, councillors wishing to keep their personal life and role as a councillor separate create a Facebook page which members of the public can like rather than using their personal profiles.

## **Conduct**

Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Code of conduct for members and relevant law. You are acting in your "official capacity" and any conduct may fall within the Code whenever you:

- Conduct the business of the Parish Council; or
- Act, claim to act or give the impression you are acting as a representative of the Parish Council; or
- Act as a representative of the Parish Council.

The following guidance is not exhaustive and if you have any queries you should contact the monitoring officer.

Breaches of this policy may amount to a breach of the council's code of conduct for members. A formal complaint may be made to the monitoring officer, who will review the complaint, consult with the independent person, and then give their decision on how the complaint will be dealt with.

Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act, could lead to fines being issued and possible criminal or civil action being taken against the council or the individual(s) involved.

The council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the Code of conduct for members.

## **Principles for Using Social Media**

You should follow these five guiding principles for any social media activities:

**Be respectful** – set the tone for online conversations by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language, be cordial, honest and professional at all times. Make sure that you respect people's confidentiality – do not disclose non-public information or the personal information of others.

**Be credible and consistent** – be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications.

**Be honest about who you are** – it's important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. Be clear about your own personal role.

**Be responsive** – make an effort to share what you know. Offer insights where appropriate and put people in touch with someone who can help if you can't. Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner.

**Be confident** – don't be scared of participating. Follow these rules and seek further guidance if you need it. If you're about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, pause to think about it. Feel confident in what you say before you say it – and say it as clearly as you can.

## **Guidance on Capturing Social Media Posts**

Posts made using third party sites such as Facebook or Twitter are not held or within the control of the council - posts can be deleted by site administrators without knowledge or consent of the council. In exceptional circumstances, copies of posts may be made and retained by the council, (e.g. as evidence of inappropriate posts) in line with relevant council procedures, (depending on the nature of the allegation). These copies will be held for a period dependent on the type of investigation they are subject to, (e.g. disciplinary, audit, criminal, etc).

Where inappropriate use is suspected, it is suggested that you should pro-actively attempt to capture any inappropriate posts (before they might be deleted). Copies should be made and reported to the Chief Executive or the Monitoring Officer within the council, as well as following the social media sites own reporting procedures where appropriate. Please note that this is just one means of gathering evidence of inappropriate use; it does not preclude the gathering of other types of evidence, e.g. witness statements.

## **Relationship with Other Council Policies**

This social media policy should be read in conjunction with:

- Standing Orders.
- The Code of conduct for members which regulates the standards of conduct of members of Selston Parish Council.
- The Data Protection Act 1998 with regards the collection, storage and use of personal data.