



## **Social Media Policy**

### **1. Introduction**

Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content, including social media sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction. This policy is intended to help Councillors and Council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media and to outline Wootton Parish Council's position on various aspects of its use, including the management of comments made by members of the public when using Wootton Parish Council's social media sites.

It includes standards and guidelines for Councillors and Council staff to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments, and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites, which include (but are not limited to):

- Wootton Parish Council website
- Facebook, Instagram, and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro-blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Email

This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by Wootton Parish Council. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

Over time, Wootton Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services the Council delivers. When these changes occur, this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This policy may be amended at any time.

### **2. How Social Media Will Be Used by the Council**

Social media may be used for:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of Council-based services, decisions, and actions
- Supporting local democracy
- Distributing in whole or part information from council notices, agendas, approved minutes, and dates of meetings
- Information specifically agreed to be communicated via social media at Council meetings
- Advertising events and activities that Wootton Parish Council has organised or co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community
- Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area
- Announcing new information relevant to people living in or around the Wootton/Northampton area
- Providing and exchanging information about local services and events
- Gathering residents' insights
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area
- Advertising Wootton Parish Council vacancies
- Re-tweeting or sharing relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, NHS, etc.

- Posting, retweeting, or sharing relevant information from local community groups for community benefit such as information from community associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, Scouts/Guides, and charities
- Linking to appropriate websites and other social media accounts of sites or organisations that meet the council's expectations of conduct
- Posting other items as the council sees fit
- Referring resident queries via social media to the Clerk for wider dissemination to Councillors if required
- Councillors and Staff should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgment may be made if appropriate.

Wootton Parish Council runs its social media pages so that it can pass information on to residents quickly. Social media accounts will not necessarily be checked daily, and posts will not necessarily be responded to.

Though Wootton Parish Council is keen to hear residents' views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments or complaints. To manage the messages received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to forward their comments to Wootton Parish Council. This can be done by emailing the Parish Clerk/Booking Team or completing an official feedback form found on our website. Auto-reply messaging will be used on our social media pages where possible, to this effect.

**Who Is Covered by This Policy?**

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted Parish Councillors and Council Staff.

All Councillors and Staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the council, its services, employees, partners, and community.

Individual Parish Councillors and Council Staff are responsible for what they post, both in a council and personal capacity.

### **3. Code of Practice**

When using social media channels in direct connection to local council matters, Councillors and Staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Councillors and Staff should not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face-to-face.

When participating in online communication, Councillors and Staff must:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative, and balanced
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors, staff, and residents
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud' (e.g., using sentence case format and not writing in capital letters or red to emphasize points)
- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos (posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offense, so Councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright).
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation with the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Be objective, balanced, informative, and accurate
- Remember that communications on the internet are permanent and public
- Be aware that their profile as a Councillor means it is more likely they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking

Parish Councillors and Council Officers must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers

- Use an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless given written permission to do so (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation)
- Present personal opinions as those of Wootton Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets, or communicates online personally and not in the role as a Councillor or staff member, they must not claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council (i.e., they should not include web links to official Council websites, Council logos, Council email addresses, or any other Council identification as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council).
- Respond to residents' comments or queries on social media in their capacity as a Councillor. All such communications should be referred to the Parish Clerk, who will respond or escalate the matter appropriately.
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council
- Make false or misleading statements
- Post personal or political content in relation to local parish issues, or content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council, or post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- Make derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory, or offensive comments about any person, including council staff, councillors, the council, volunteers or about the people, businesses, and agencies the council works with and serves, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Language that may be deemed offensive relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site
- Engage in personal attacks, online fights, or hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others. The sentiment and emotion within written text are open to interpretation by the individual reader. Negative comments should be politely acknowledged, and the author directed to our official channels to formalise any official complaint
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person that is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action)
- Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offense and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conduct any online activity that violates laws or regulations or that constitutes a criminal offense
- Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity

Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute pre-disposition, predetermination, or bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff, volunteers, or residents should report them to the Parish Clerk for referral to the Chairman or the Council as required.

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

#### **4. Managing Social Media Accounts**

The Parish Clerk will be responsible for monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

The Clerk, Bar & Functions Manager and the Library Manager will be responsible for posting content on the council website and social media pages.

Councillors and Council staff should be mindful when sharing posts onto any social media account that is not solely controlled by Wootton Parish Council. Content shared and discussions/comments arising from such posts onto another social media account may not be under our control or governed by our acceptable use policy.

The Clerk, Bar & Functions Manager, Library Manager, or any Councillor also acting as a moderator will have the authority, without notice or comment, to remove any posts from council social media pages which are deemed to be of an inflammatory, defamatory, or libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (e.g., Facebook) and to the Parish Clerk for council records.

The Clerk, Bar & Functions Manager, Library Manager, or any Councillor acting as a moderator will also have the authority to block or ban access from an individual or company's account to RPC's social media pages.

The Parish Clerk will also be responsible for checking the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used.

Councillors may assist the Parish Clerk in disseminating information; however, all must ensure they follow this policy.

No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk or full council.

## **5. Press/Media Channels**

An unusual or extraordinary localised event may trigger an active interest, including direct contact, from the Press and other Media channels.

The Clerk is the first point of contact for the media. Approaches from the media should be referred to the Parish Clerk. Individual councillors are not permitted to issue media releases on behalf of the Parish Council.

The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information, or to explain the council's position on a particular issue. The Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman, is responsible for issuing formal press releases on behalf of the Council.

Proactive media releases may be issued to promote a decision or work of the Parish Council.

Reactive press releases may be prepared and issued in response to a specific question or as a rebuttal to an article already published. Such statements should be dealt with in a timely manner.

Unless a Parish Councillor has been authorised by the Council to speak to the media on a particular issue, parish councillors who are asked for comment by the press should make it clear that any views they express are personal and not necessarily those of the Council.

Confidential matters, including items discussed at meetings where the press and public have been excluded, must not be divulged.

Letters or articles representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Parish Clerk unless they have been specifically approved by Council. If Members choose to express their own opinions on Council matters, they must make it clear that the views put forward are those of the individual Member and not representative of Council policy.

Members and the Clerk should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

We reserve the right to temporarily suspend any or all our social media accounts, without notice, should a localised extraordinary event occur.