

Social Media & Electronic Communications Policy

First Approved: 20 July 2020 (Min1846)

Last reviewed and updated: 6 September 2021

Next review date: Sept 2022

Version 1.9

Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

The Council has a website, Facebook pages, Twitter and YouTube accounts, Instagram profile and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

The Council Facebook pages, Twitter and YouTube accounts and Instagram profile intends to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.

The purpose of the Social Media accounts is to provide and communicate information about services; support local democracy; gather resident insight and manage relationships with residents; promote cultural events or tourism in the area; support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience; and create internal communications and promote learning and development.

Communications from the Council, Councillors and staff will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant.
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive.
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright.
- Not contain any sensitive or personal information.
- If it is official Council business, it will be moderated by either the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council or the Clerk to the Council.
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

In order to ensure that all discussions on any of the Council's communication channels are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, you are required to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abusive language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal comments/attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted. Don't be drawn into or escalate heated discussions. Stick to the facts

Staplehurst Parish Council

and keep your tone professional at all times.

- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Don't discuss any third parties without their prior knowledge or consent.
- Stay on topic.
- Be mindful of any perceived conflict of interest, whether personal or professional.
- Do not publish or discuss anything confidential to the Council, or that you have come into contact with as part of your role with the Council, before it is officially in the public domain.
- Ensure that photographs used have the express written permission of the photographer and the individuals in the photograph, unless it is a stock photo freely available. Ensure parental consent is given for any image of a young person (under the age of 18) is to be used where they can be identified.
- Refrain from using the Council's social media for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

The Council's website and social media pages are not monitored 24/7 and we will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people or authorities. Please do not include personal/private information in your social media messages/posts to us.

Sending a message/post via social media will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we are not obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or members of the Council by emailing.

Once comments/posts are made on the Council's social media pages, the content becomes the property of the Council and as such the Council reserve the right to reproduce, distribute, publish, display, edit or delete any content.

We retain the right to remove comments 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 or personal information published without consent.
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum.
- Commercial promotions or spam.
- A breach of a Council's policy or the law.

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on social media not in line

Staplehurst Parish Council

with the above criteria will be removed as quickly and as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from social media. The Council may post a statement that '*A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed*'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

Parish Council Website

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our councillors or the Clerk for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's policy for the web site. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the web site if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's policy for its website. Where content on the website is supplied by a local group, it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

Parish Council email

The Clerk to the Council has their own Council email address clerk@staplehurst-pc.uk. The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Individual councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views with, if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. Care should be taken to ensure that the recipient is aware that it is their personal view and not that of the Council. Councillors are not able to represent the views of the Council unless previously agreed by full Council that they are communicating on its behalf. Councillors should note however that any communication in writing via email could be subject to disclosure in the event of a subject access request and potentially a freedom of information request, regardless of whether the Clerk has been included in the correspondence or not.

Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

Phone texting including WhatsApp or other similar utilities

Members and the Clerk may use texting as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages. Some WhatsApp groups are setup already to facilitate communications within the group members. Councillors should note however that any communication in writing via text, WhatsApp or any other social media communication channel could be subject to disclosure in the event of a subject access request and potentially a freedom of information request, regardless of the whether the Clerk has been included in this correspondence or not.

Video Conferencing e.g. Skype/Zoom – including Council and sub-committee/group meetings

If these media are used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

Internal communication and access to information within the Council.

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering this improvement.

Press releases

Unless otherwise approved by the Council, only the Chairman of the Council and the Clerk are authorised to communicate with the media on Council-related matters, including via press releases.

The Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Council. When communicating with the press or media care must be taken not to use Council's facilities to communicate personal opinions.

Code of Conduct

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct, The Nolan Principles ([The Seven Principles of Public Life - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-seven-principles-of-public-life)) and the [General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018](https://www.gov.uk/government/legislation/the-general-data-protection-regulation-and-the-data-protection-act-2018) in all their work on behalf of the Council.

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Staplehurst Parish Council

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

Councillors need to be aware of these policies and also need to ensure that the Council is making the most of the social media opportunities.

The views and work of sub-committees/groups that are related to the Council are also the views of the Council. Councillors should also be prudent not to misrepresent these views.

Subject to the obligations on councillors not to misrepresent the Council's position, councillors are free to communicate their own position and views. This policy does not seek to regulate councillors in their own private capacity. However, councillors should be mindful that their position as a local councillor is often known to the wider public and they should therefore be careful to clearly distinguish that any comments made are personal and not that of the Council.

Using social networking sites as a councillor requires a different approach to using it as an ordinary resident. If councillors use social media to help them carry out their work as councillors rather than in their private capacity, their obligation to meet certain standards of conduct still applies. While the Code of Conduct does not exist to gag or stop them expressing their views, it does, however, prohibit treating others with disrespect, bullying and bringing one's office or authority into disrepute.

When responding to comments via social media, councillors should not forget that they are still in a public space. They should beware of a quick reaction to a challenge and continue to present themselves as reasonable and thoughtful. While the immediacy of social media can be a great benefit, it has also the downside that broadcasting spontaneous remarks may quickly seem unwise and can easily be misinterpreted. Such remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published and are permanent, and in a way that cannot be contained.

Councillors should also be aware that by publishing information that they could not have accessed without their position as a councillor, they will be seen as acting in their official capacity.