Social Media Policy

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The use of digital and social media now has a clear and compelling impact on all areas of local government, enabling better and more direct contact between the Council and the people and organisations that it serves and works with.

This social media Policy aims to describe how the Council will use social media to improve and expand the ways in which it communicates with its local residents, local businesses and the various government (local and central) agencies that it deals with. It sets out what is and is not acceptable usage of social media and complements the general rules in the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

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, Twitter, Linked-In, Instagram and Snapchat.

Social media is all about sharing information and people use social media platforms 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 many 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

The CEO is responsible for all formal communication between the council and members of the public and will be responsible for maintaining the Council website, Facebook pages and any other Council social media.

However, it is understood that there will be times when individual councillors and officers may be communicating on social media.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the CEO or Chair of the Council, who should ensure that all complaints are dealt with consistently and fairly.

For councillors, complaints will be dealt with following the Council's Complaints Policy, with complaints concerning the councillor's conduct being referred to the Borough Council Monitoring Officer.

For employees, complaints will be dealt with following the Council's Disciplinary Procedure.

PROCEDURE

Social media Use

Social media communications from the Council **will meet the following criteria**:

- be civil, tasteful 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, but this will often be the case.

Councillors and staff 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 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 you or 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.
- Your personal and councillor profile on social networking sites should be 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 your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence, and were genuinely persuadable to a different view, or the decision may be later challenged as invalid.

Social Media page

It is our intention that the Snodland Town Council Facebook page will provide timely information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Town and a vehicle for constructive comments & suggestions from residents and local organisations.

To ensure that all discussions on the Snodland Town Council page is 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 were credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the STC 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.

Snodland Town Council will remove any comment or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarized 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

Safeguarding

Councillors and Council staff must be aware of safeguarding issues, as social media sites are often misused by offenders. Snodland Town Council encourages children and young people to stay safe online.
Any concerns about a child's safety should be reported on 03000 411111.
Any concerns about an adult's safety should be reported to 03000 419191.