

Norham Parish Council Social Media Policy

POLICY STATEMENT

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 Parish Council and the people and organizations that it serves and works with.

This Social Media Policy aims to describe how the Parish 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 Facebook. 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 a large number of 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 Parish Clerk 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 may be communicating on social media.

PROCEDURE

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

- be civil, tasteful and relevant
- not contain content that is unlawful, libelous, 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 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 should always spell out clearly whether they are communicating on social media in their capacity as a councillor or as a private individual.

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 in order 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.

Consider keeping your personal and councillor profile on social networking sites 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.

Related Policies and Procedures

These include, but are not limited to:

Councillor Code of Conduct

Communications Policy

Data Protection