

Mabe Parish Council

Social Media Policy

Draft to council – October 2022

Aim

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to parish councillors, council staff and others who engage with the council using online communications – social media.

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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 based on user interaction.

At the time of writing this policy, the Council uses social media through the parish council 'facebook' account and the parish council website. Social media sites also include other social networking sites, Twitter and other micro-blogging sites, Youtube and other video/podcast sites, LinkedIn, blogs and discussion forums, email.

This policy is intended to help Councillors and Council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media, and to outline Mabe Parish Council's position on various aspects of its use. The policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by Mabe Parish Council. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. The policy will include any additional channels of communication used by the Council used in the future.

2. How social media will be used by the Council

Social media may be used for a range of uses, including any of the following:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of Council based services, decisions and actions
- Supporting local democracy
- Distribute 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 the Council has organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community
- Providing information relevant to people living in the parish, including sharing information from partner agencies (eg Cornwall Council, Police, NHS etc)
- Support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- Gathering local residents' views
- Advertising vacancies
- Post other items as the council sees fit

It can be noted that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

The Council's social media accounts will not necessarily be checked daily and posts will not necessarily be responded to, they are primarily a tool to pass information on.

Comments made on the Council's social media accounts will not be received as official comments and so the public should be aware of this, particularly with regard to planning applications and other formal consultations. For consultations and official comments, it is best to contact the Council by emailing the parish clerk (clerk@mabeparish.com), by contacting a Parish Councillor or by attending a monthly meeting.

3. Who is covered by this policy

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted Parish Councillors, council staff and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

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 have the same legal duties as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of serious breaches of this policy by employees. This may include unlawful, libelous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by an employee.

Volunteers in breach of the policy will result in the council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

Councillors must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking.

Councillors and staff must remember that communications on the internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

A Councillor or council staff member's behaviour on any social media site must be consistent with the behaviour required generally.

4. Code of Practice

When using social media, 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.

It is recommended that rather than post council and personal posts on a parish Councillor's own social media account, Councillors should operate separate accounts, one solely for posts made in the capacity as a parish councillor and the other/s solely for posts made in their personal capacity.

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 should:

- 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' i.e. do not write in capital letters, or red letters, to emphasis points
- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos. Note that posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence and so Councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright.
- When posting in relation to any council business, always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate
- Take care with spelling and grammar, as with any written communication

Parish Councillors and staff should not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers
- Use an individual's name 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 Mabe Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets or communications online personally, and not in the role as a Councillor or member of council staff, 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 the impression that they are representing the Council.
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they should protect the good reputation of the Council
- Make false or misleading statements

- Post personal or political content, 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 of post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Language that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site
- Engage in personal attacks, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on social media to damage their working relationships with others
- Publish photos or videos of minors without parental permission
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which 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 offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
- Bring the council into disrepute

Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated at a council 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 or residents should report them to the Parish Clerk for referral to the moderator(s) and/or the Council as required.

5. Managing social media accounts

The Council will appoint those responsible for posting content on the council website and social media accounts. Those appointed will be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

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

The Parish Clerk 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 the council's social media pages.

If comments are allowed from the public on the Council's social media pages, these communications should be:

- Responsible and respectful
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors, staff and residents

Posts may be deleted and the holder of an account banned if a comment or post breaches any of the general posting requirements set out above. It is ultimately up to the moderators

– either acting individually or in consultation – as to whether a post will be deleted and/or an account blocked.

No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the council.