

NINFIELD

PARISH COUNCIL

Social Media Policy

1. Introduction

Ninfield Parish Council (NPC) recognises that the Internet provides a unique opportunity to participate in interactive discussions and share information using a wide variety of social media (defined in scope). Employees and councillors are likely to use social media in a private capacity outside of the council and they may also be required to use it in a business capacity as part of their role at the Parish Council.

Employees' and councillors' use of social media in both a personal and business capacity can present risks to our confidential information and reputation and can jeopardise our compliance with legal obligations. To minimise these risks, we expect employees and councillors to adhere to this policy.

The purpose of this policy is to assist employees and councillors by providing clear guidance about acceptable behaviour on social media both at work and out of work.

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of serious breaches of this policy by employees. This may include unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented 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.

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. Councillors must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means it is more likely that 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.

The council encourages everyone in our community to share content from our corporate social media accounts with their own social media networks. This is especially important, for example, during emergency situations or where sharing timely information is essential.

2. Scope

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) and is should be used as guidance for anyone communicating with the Parish Council 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.

This policy applies to the use of social media for both business and personal purposes whether during office hours or otherwise. It also applies whether the social media is accessed using Council IT facilities, or equipment belonging to employees or councillors. This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Ninfield Parish Council website

- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- X (formerly Twitter) and other blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
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- Email and other direct communication platforms.

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

3. Definitions

Social media is a type of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other, or to share data in a public forum.

There are many more examples of social media than can be listed here and this is a constantly changing area. This policy refers to the examples listed and any new social media which is developed in the future.

4. Using social media sites in the name of Ninfield Parish Council.

All posts on behalf of the Parish Council must go via agreed councillors seeking advice from the Clerk as necessary. Post should only be made on established Parish Council Social Media accounts.

Councillors' authority to post will be withdrawn during a defined period before local council elections in order to comply with legislation (previously known as Purdah).

Councillors should also be aware that the Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature which includes web advertising on their personal social media accounts. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

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 Ninfield 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 Ninfield area.
- Providing and exchanging information about local services and events.
- Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience.
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area.
- Advertising vacancies.
- Re-tweeting or sharing relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.

- Post, retweet or share relevant information from local community groups for community benefit such as information from community associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, Scouts/Guides and charities.
- Link to appropriate websites and other social media accounts of sites or organisations that meet the council's expectations of conduct.
- Post other items as the council see fit once agreed by the council.
- Refer 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 acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

5. Personal Safety and Privacy

Employees and councillors need to be aware that the information they post on their personal social media profile can make them identifiable to residents and service users, as well as people they know in a private capacity.

Online sites such as Facebook are in the public domain, and personal profile details can be seen by anyone, even if users have their privacy settings on the highest level, if a user's profile is linked to other sites, any changes to their profile will be updated there too.

Employees and councillors who have set their privacy level to the maximum can have their privacy compromised by 'friends' who may not have set their security to the same standard. All communication should be through official contact channels and should be directed to, or passed on to the clerk.

6. Key Principles

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. NPC's social media accounts are primarily a tool to pass information on.

NPC is keen to hear resident's views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments. In order to manage the messages received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to forward their comments to NPC. This can be done by emailing the Parish Clerk, by contacting a Parish Councillor or by attending a monthly meeting.

Employees and councillors must not:

- use the Cllr or Councillor title on personal social media.
- present personal opinions as that of the Parish Council.
- bring the Parish Council into disrepute or cause embarrassment, including through content posted in a personal capacity.
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Parish Council
- disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk.
- post comments on employees or councillors without their prior approval.
- upload, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent. This includes use of an individual's name without

written permission to do so; publishing photographs or videos of minors without parental permission.

- post any information that infringes copyright of others including any link to a third-party website without checking that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.
- post, forward or link to controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks, engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications as this may constitute bullying or harassment and will bring the Parish Council into disrepute.
- conduct any online activity that is against regulation or law e.g., may be deemed libellous or that constitutes a criminal offence.

Examples of good practice:

- Be honest and open but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the Parish Council.
- Don't escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.
- Consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g., politics and religion.
- Offer routes to enable resolution of concerns and complaints e.g., how to report to Wealden District Council and other statutory bodies.

The above examples are not a definitive list but are examples to illustrate what misuse and good practice may look like.

7. Addressing allegations of misuse

Any employee or councillor who feels that they have been harassed or bullied or are offended by material posted or uploaded onto a council social media website should inform the Clerk or Chairman of the Parish 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 Wealden District Council Monitoring Officer.

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

8. 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. 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' i.e. use sentence case format and not write in capital letters or red to emphasise points.

- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos (posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence so Councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright).
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms.
- Councillors using their own social media accounts or any other form of communication for community or other purposes do so as private individuals and should not use any privileged material gained from their position as a Parish Councillor.
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- Spell and grammar check everything Parish councillors and council staff must not:
 - Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers or email addresses.
 - 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 that of Ninfield Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets or communicates 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 or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council.
 - 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, 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 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 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, online fights, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others.
 - Publish photographs 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, 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 in accordance with the Localism Act 2011. 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.

9. Managing Social Media Accounts

The Parish Clerk will be responsible for posting content on council website and councils social media pages. The Council will appoint a moderator, usually the Parish Clerk, to moderate Parish Council social media output and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with this social media Policy. The council may appoint a councillor to act as a moderator in the absence of the clerk.

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 libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (i.e. 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 SPC's social media pages.

When participating in online communication, NPC will generally allow posts on its social media pages from members of the public that:

- Are responsible and respectful.
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents.
- Are objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Posts may be deleted and the holder of an account banned if a comment or post:

- Gives out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers.
- Mentions an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless deemed reasonable (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation).
- Makes intentionally false or misleading statements.
- Includes potentially inflammatory, defamatory, libellous or offensive remarks.
- Makes derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory or offensive comments about any person including council staff, councillors, the council or about the people, businesses and agencies the council works with and serves, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Uses language that may be deemed offensive, in particular relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief.
- Engages in personal attacks, online fights, and/or hostile communications.
- Includes the publication of photographs or videos of minors without parental permission.
- Includes 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).
- Includes obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence).
- Conducts any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence.

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. 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 to disseminate 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.

This policy will be reviewed on an annual basis.

Adopted	Reviewed	Next Review
21 September 2023	September 2024	November 2025