

# Social Media Policy & Procedures

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# Staplehurst Parish Council

## DOCUMENT HISTORY

- (a) Adopted by Staplehurst Parish Council on 01 April 2019 (Min. Page 1755) and inclusion of the key:
- Employees
  - Councillors / Members
  - Non-Councillor Members
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Social Media is an increasingly popular form of communication for individuals and organisations. It is used both socially and for business.
- 1.2 There are many benefits to engaging with social media. It can give us, as a council, connection and dialogue with different types of residents that we may not reach via other channels. Conversations are already happening out there – this is our opportunity to get involved.
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## 2. PURPOSE

- 2.1 This Social Media Policy and associated procedures provide employees and Members with guidance on the use of social media, both for council and personal purposes and also sets clear expectations as to employee and Member Conduct. This is to ensure that all employees and Members use social media effectively for both council and personal purposes without inadvertently placing themselves in a situation where the appropriateness of their conduct is called into question.
- 2.2 This policy will help you to make the right decisions about social media and understand the impact if you get it wrong. It outlines the standards we expect when you engage in social media, for business and personal use.
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## 3. SCOPE

- 3.1 For the purpose of this policy, social media is any type of interactive online media that allows parties to participate in interactive discussions and share information in a public forum.
- 3.2 This includes online social forums such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Social media also covers blogs, video and image-sharing websites such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr and Instagram.
- 3.3 There are many more examples of social media than can be listed here and this is a constantly changing area.

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- 3.4 This policy applies to all employees of the Council. The policy will also apply to all agency workers, casual workers, consultants and interims engaged from time to time by the Council.
- 3.5 This policy applies to all Members of the Council (Councillors) and all Non-Councillor Members. Failure to comply with this policy will be referred for investigation under the Code of Conduct.
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## 4. RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

- 4.1 Employees, Members and Non-Councillor Members are responsible for their own compliance with this policy and for ensuring that it is consistently applied to protect the privacy, confidentiality, reputation and interests of the Council.
- 4.2 In this regard the expectations regarding use of social media are considered to fall within the ambit of the Council's Code of Conduct.
- 4.3 All employees, Members and Non-Councillor Members should ensure that they take the time to read and understand the policy and accompanying procedures and guidance.
- 4.4 Any concerns about social media use should be reported to your line manager (for employees) or the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Parish Clerk (for Members and Non-Councillor Members) in the first instance. If this is not possible, please speak direct to the Chair of the Communications Group.
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## 5. BUSINESS USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 5.1 Employees should have the approval of their line manager before taking part in social media activity for business purposes.
- 5.2 Members and Non-Councillor Members should have the approval of the Communications Group before taking part in social media activity for business purposes. For avoidance of doubt, this means posting as 'Staplehurst Parish Council' or by making a statement or perceived as making a statement on behalf of the Parish Council using a personal account or alias.
- 5.3 The Chairman of the Council will automatically have approval.
- 5.4 The Chair of the Communications Group will automatically have approval.
- 5.5 The Parish Clerk will automatically have approval.
- 5.6 Employees, Members and Non-Councillor Members should strive to be trained in Social Media.

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- 5.7 Generally, the use of social media in a business context is to:
- promote and publicise activities that will enhance the reputation of the Council, the service it provides and commissions, and the wider community of organisations with which it works in partnership;
  - respond to specific questions from the public, business and partners;
  - clarify or correct any unclear or incorrect statements or views;
  - provide information, advice and guidance (particularly useful in emergency situations).
- 5.8 Councillors and employees must have sufficient resources to look after their social media accounts (council business related). Your 'friends' and 'followers' will expect quick responses to any queries, and you will need to update your accounts regularly.
- 5.9 Remember social media is a two-way conversation – you will get feedback and some of it may be challenging. All your posts and responses are public statements and **you are responsible for anything that you say online.**
- 5.10 All information that you post counts as a Council record and is evidence of the Council's work. It may be used as reference at any time in the future. You must not use any information that you obtain in the course of your work for the council (as an employee, Member or Non-Councillor Member) for personal gain or pass it on to others who may use it in such a way.
- 5.11 You must not disclose any sensitive information. Sensitive information may relate to matters that are being considered or debated, or are due to be considered or debated, by the Council or one or more of the Council's committees, groups or sub-groups (or are awaiting a decision as a result of such consideration/debate). It will also include subject matters which are known to be, or could reasonably be considered likely to be, controversial. If in any doubt in this regards you should seek advice from your line manager (for employees) or the Chair of the Communications Group (for Members and Non-Councillor Members).
- 5.12 The Parish Clerk and the Chairman of the Council are excluded from the Clause 5.11, where there is an issue of significant public interest, which could lead to reputational damage if not responding to controversial matters.
- 5.13 You must never publish confidential information through social media that you have learned or have accessed as part of your work on the Council (as an employee, Member or Non-Councillor Member). This includes personal information about service users, their families or friends or others (e.g. contractors, elected members, council employees, as well as council-related information). This requirement continues after you have left employment (as an employee) or office (as a Member of Non-Councillor Member).

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- 5.14 You should keep in mind the following Council policies and guidance when considering any social media activity, whether business or personal:
    - ● Code of Conduct (Members and Employees)
    - ● Non-Councillor Members' Policy
    - ● Internet Acceptable Use Policy
    - ● Email Acceptable Use Policy
    - ● Data Protection and Freedom of Information Policies (various) and Guidance
    - ● Employee Handbook
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## 6. PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 6.1 As the use and popularity of social media grows, the line between what is public and private, personal and professional can become blurred. It is important therefore that employees, Members and Non-Councillor Members are aware that their personal digital activity could have an adverse impact on their professional role or the Council's image and reputation.
- 6.2 Even if you do not expressly name the Council as your employer or that you are a Member or Non-Councillor Member of the Council on social media, this policy will still apply if a connection with the Council can be reasonably inferred.
- 6.3 The Council's Code of Conduct applies to any public comment you make on matters relating to the Council or specific services delivered or commissioned by the Council. This could include sharing content posted by others which could be regarded as tacit approval of that content.
- 6.4 Council policies (in particular the Code of Conduct) provide guidance on what the Council considers to be acceptable and unacceptable conduct, although they should not be regarded as exhaustive. In particular the Council will not tolerate any of the following in relation to a social media 'posting' which could be viewed as connected to you in your capacity as an employee of the Council, Member of the Council or Non-Councillor Member of the Council.
  - ● abusive or threatening behaviour;
  - ● inappropriate comments or material that may be regarded as discriminatory;
  - ● false and misleading statements that may reflect adversely on the Council;
  - ● inciting or supporting somebody to commit a crime or other unlawful acts.

Again, examples outlined in Clause 6.4, could include sharing content originated by others as this could be regarded as your tacit approval of that content.

- 6.5 You must consider carefully 'friend requests' from service users, their families or friends and others (e.g. contractors, elected members or employees) and accept them only if you are quite sure this will not put you in a position of having a real or apparent conflict of interest.

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- 6.6 As is the case for business use of social media, you should never publish anything that is confidential to the Council or use social media to comment on potentially sensitive matters, including – but not restricted to – the following:
    - information regarding service users;
    - any information intended for internal use only (including matters concerning council services, organisational changes or related proposals);
    - intellectual property.
  - 6.7 Do not use Council email addresses and other official contact details for setting up personal social media accounts or for communicating through such media.
  - 6.8 You should always show respect to others when using social media. You must never be disrespectful towards the Council, its service users, contractors, associated organisations, your colleagues or anyone else you come into contact with professionally.
  - 6.9 Do not use personal social media to raise or discuss a complaint or grievance about the Council, your manager or colleagues, etc. There are formal grievance procedures for progressing these within the Council.
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## 7. WHAT HAPPENS IF IT GOES WRONG?

- 7.1 Mistakes happen – if you post something you did not mean to, or get a message wrong, tell your line manager (for employees) or the Chair of the Communications Group (for Members and Non-Councillor Members) immediately and agree remedial action to avoid embarrassment and reputational damage.
- 7.2 Anyone who feels that they have been subject to cyber-bullying or offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague through a digital communication network (whether from a work or personal account) should inform their line manager (for employees) or the Chair of the Communications Group (for Members and Non-Councillor Members), who will investigate the matter as appropriate.
- 7.3 The Council regards cyber-bullying as seriously as any other form of bullying or harassment. As with other forms of bullying and harassment, cyber-bullying will not be tolerated and will be regarded as misconduct (for employees) and will be referred for investigation under the Code of Conduct (for Members and Non-Councillor Members).
- 7.4 It should also be noted that, although there is not at present a legal definition within UK law, there are a number of existing laws that can be applied to cases of cyber-bullying and online harassment, which could constitute a criminal offence, including:
  - The Protection from Harassment Act 1997
  - The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994
  - The Malicious Communications Act 1988

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- The Communications Act 2003 (s. 127)
- The Defamation Act 2013

- 7.5 The Council recognises it is the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees and will have regard to this duty in respect of incidents of cyber-bullying.
- 7.6 If your online activities are considered to breach the Council's Social Media Policy, the Council may require you to remove such content that, in itself, in the reasonable opinion of the Council, breaches the policy.

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## 8. BREACH OF POLICY

- 8.1 Breach of this policy may lead to formal action under the Council's Disciplinary Policy and associated procedures for employees and could lead to dismissal in serious cases for employees.
- 8.2 Breach of this policy may lead to formal action under the Code of Conduct for Members and Non-Councillor Members.

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## 9. MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

- 9.1 This policy will be reviewed annually by the Communications Group in consultation with the Parish Clerk to ensure it meets legal requirements and reflects good practice.

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## 10. APPLICABILITY OF THIS POLICY

- 10.1 The applicability of this policy will commence from 2nd April 2019. Any breaches of this policy, where the employee, Member or Non-Councillor Member has physically posted prior to this date will not be covered by this policy. However, on the day of 2nd April 2019 and every day thereafter, this policy will apply.
- 10.2 This Policy does not intend to infringe on any individual's right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers. The exercise of the rights provided carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary.

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## A. APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO SOCIAL MEDIA

**Blog:** term derived from 'weblog' meaning an internet log or diary/journal.

**Blogsphere:** all blogs collectively on the internet.

**Direct Message:** a message sent via a social media platform directly to someone who follows you or who you follow.

**Cyber bullying:** While there is currently no legal definition, 'cyber-bullying' is defined by the National Crime Prevention Council as: "When the internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."

**Facebook:** an example of a social network.

**Flickr:** photo sharing site.

**Follower:** someone who has chosen to follow you on social media.

**Friend:** someone who you have allowed to access your page – not necessarily a real friend.

**Forum:** a virtual discussion area.

**#Hashtag:** a hashtag or # is a way of denoting a keyword which can be used as a search term on many social media platforms.

**Instagram:** a platform for sharing photos and videos.

**Microblog:** short blog (e.g. Twitter using a maximum number of characters).

**Pinterest:** a virtual pinboard for creating and sharing images and documents.

**Retweet:** to forward a message or Tweet seen on Twitter.

**Social networking:** using sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. to communicate and share information.

**Snapchat:** a photo messaging application for photos, videos, drawings and text.

**Spam:** electronic junk mail.

**Trending:** current popular people or conversations as in 'trending on Twitter now...'

**Troll:** someone who disrupts online communities or discussions through unhelpful, offensive or irrelevant posts.

**Tweet:** a message on Twitter.

**Vimeo:** a platform used for sharing videos and photographs.

**YouTube:** a platform for sharing videos.