



MEDIA POLICY (COUNCILLORS)

Policy 15

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Social media is the term for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests.
- 1.2 For the purposes of this policy, the term “social media” covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, blogs, and any similar sites which develop after the creation of this policy. It also includes comments on online newspaper articles.

2.0 Benefits And Risks

2.1 potential benefits of using social media include:

- Ability to connect with harder-to-reach groups;
- Real-time updates on emerging situations (i.e. as they happen);
- Heightened level of interactivity;
- Low cost in comparison with traditional forms of media;
- Enhanced transparency;
- Building a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood;
- Increased resident satisfaction levels;
- Help to reduce social problems like vandalism or racism.

2.2 Risks identified with using of social media include:

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites;
- Disclosure of confidential information;
- Damage to the reputation of the Council;
- Social engineering attacks or “phishing”. (This is the act of manipulating people into disclosing confidential material or carrying out certain actions. Social engineering is often conducted by individuals fraudulently claiming to be a business or client);
 - Bullying or witch-hunting;
 - Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation;
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.

3.0 Who This Policy Covers

- 3.1 This policy covers all Councillors. It should be considered in conjunction with the Council’s Code of Conduct for Councillors.
- 3.2 It relates to all use of social media, whether inside or outside of official capacities.

4.0 Who Can Use Social Media

- 4.1 The Clerk will have control of any social media sites set up for the Council as a corporate body. It is recommended that in the case of Facebook and similar sites, Councillors wishing to keep their personal life and official capacities separate should create separate accounts.

5.0 Users' Responsibilities

- 5.1 Councillors using social media should make use of stringent privacy settings if they do not wish them to be accessed by the press and public.
- 5.2 In any biography where the Councillor is identified as a Councillor, the account should state that the views are those of the Councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council. Use of the Council's logo on a personal account or website should only occur with the written permission of the Clerk.
- 5.3 The Council's logo should not be used on sites or applications which are unrelated to or not representative of the Council's official position. If in doubt, contact the Clerk.
- 5.4 Where possible, a Councillor should make clear who they are in the profile of any account and whether they are an authorised representative of the Council, unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. In such instances, the Clerk must be advised.
- 5.5 Councillors are personally responsible for the content which they publish on any form of social media. Publishing, or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment), an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may amount to libel. Councillors should not discuss employees without the employee's prior written consent.
- 5.6 Councillors must treat others with respect, avoid personal attacks and not make disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- 5.7 Councillors must comply with equality laws contained within the Equality Act 2010, associated legislation and the Council's Equality Policy. They must not publish anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.

6.0 The Use Of Emails

- 6.1 All Councillors are provided with a specific '.gov' email address and this email address only, must be used for all Council related business.
- 6.2 Communications on the internet should not be considered secure and private and confidential. Personal or other sensitive information must not be transmitted. Councillors should not assume privacy for any internet communications of any kind. Emails and/or files can be posted or forwarded to other internet users around the world without a user's knowledge or permission.
- 6.3 Email messages constitute records of the Council and as such will be monitored and assessed accordingly. Email messages are covered by the Freedom of Information Act and should be kept for a minimum of 3 months, in case they are requested for any reason.
- 6.4 Email users must never send abusive, sexist, racists or defamatory messages.
- 6.5 Councillors are responsible for the content of all text, audio or images that they place or send over the Council's internet/email systems. All messages must contain the Council's name and contact details.

- 6.6 Any messages or information sent by a Councillor to another person outside the Council via an electronic network (e.g., bulletin board, on-line service, etc.) are statements that reflect on the Council. **All Councillors must include a personal disclaimer in emails such as “the views expressed are personal and may not necessarily reflect those of Cuckfield Parish Council, unless explicitly stated otherwise”.** Despite this disclaimer there is still, nevertheless, a legal connection to the Council and, therefore, statements may still be construed as representing the Council.
- 6.7 Data within email is predominantly personal data and as such is subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act and users must ensure they comply with these requirements.
- 6.8 Abuse of email facilities may result in a breach of the adopted Councillors Code of Conduct and subsequent referral to the Monitoring Officer.

7.0 Anonymous Postings

- 7.1 When commenting online on any matter relating to the Council, Councillors should identify themselves as a Councillor (for instance in their profile) and make it clear whether or not they are representing the views of the Council. They must not make anonymous posts nor use a pseudonym when making such comments so as to hide their identity.
- 7.2 Councillors who fail to identify themselves as a Councillor in breach of this obligation will be deemed to be acting in their official capacity for the purposes of the Code of Conduct and such failure will itself be a breach of the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

8.0 Safety

- 8.1 Councillors must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the Internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.
- 8.2 Any Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Chairman, Clerk and/or the police.
- 8.3 They should use a secure password (generally more than eight characters long and using a mixture of letters and numbers) and never share their password with anyone.

9.0 Information Protection

- 9.1 Councillors must not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activity on behalf of the Council unless they are authorised to do so.
- 9.2 They should not cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers without their prior written consent.
- 9.3 They must handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's data protection policies.

- 9.4 Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important that Councillors ensure that they are confident of the nature of the information they publish. Comments posted online are permanently available and can be used by media such as newspapers.
- 9.5 Councillors must not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal or publish exempt committee reports or private papers.
- 9.6 Copyright laws still apply online. Councillors must not use images to which they do not hold the copyright. Information shared should be attributed to the source (i.e. via web link). Councillors must respect fair-use and financial disclosure laws.

10.0 Elections

- 10.1. The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature, and this includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
- 10.2 Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities, often referred to as 'Purdah'.
- 10.2 Political blogs cannot be linked from the Council's website and the Council will not promote Councillors' Twitter accounts during the election purdah period.

11.0 Overall Best Practice

- 11.1 Councillors must not use insulting or offensive language or engage in any conduct that would not be acceptable in a workplace. They must show consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered controversial, such as politics or religion.
- 11.2 Social media must not be used to publish content which may result in action for defamation, discrimination, breaches of copyright, data protection or other claims for damages. This includes but is not limited to, material of an illegal, sexual or offensive nature that may bring the Council into disrepute.
- 11.3 Corporate social media must not be used for party political purposes nor specific campaigning purposes as the Council is not permitted to publish material which "in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party" (Local Government Act 1986). The Council's corporate social media accounts must not be used for such purposes by any Councillor.
- 11.4 Councillors must not use the Council's social media accounts to promote personal financial interests, commercial ventures or personal campaigns, whether or not related to the function of the Council.
- 11.5 Social media must not be used in an abusive or hateful manner.
- 11.6 Social media must not be used for actions that would put Councillors in breach of the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

- 11.7 Use of social media must not breach the Council's misconduct, equal opportunities or bullying and harassment policies.

12.0 Breaches Of This Policy

- 12.1 Failure to comply with this policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer to be dealt with under the Council's Standards Procedures.
- 12.2 Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act 1988, could lead to criminal or civil action being taken against the individual(s) involved.
- 12.3 The Council reserves the right to request the closure of any applications or removal of any content published by Councillors deemed inappropriate or which may adversely affect the reputation of the Council, or put it at risk of legal action