

SHRIVENHAM PARISH COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

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 centred on user interaction. This policy is intended to help Councillors and Council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media, and to outline Shrivvenham Parish Council's position on various aspects of its use, including the management of comments made by members of the public when using SPC's social media sites. It includes standards and guidelines for Councillors and Council staff to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments, and the action to be taken in respect to breaches of this policy.

This policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- 1) Shrivvenham Parish Council website
- 2) Facebook, Nextdoor and other social networking sites
- 3) Twitter and other micro-blogging sites
- 4) Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- 5) LinkedIn
- 6) Blogs and discussion forums
- 7) Email

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

The use of social media does not replace existing forms of communication.

Over time Shrivvenham Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services the Council delivers. When these changes occur this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This policy may be amended at any time.

2. How Social Media will be used by the Council

Social media may be used for:

- 1) Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of Council based services, decisions and actions
- 2) Supporting local democracy within the remit of the council
- 3) Distribution in whole or part information from council notices, agendas, approved minutes and dates of meetings (website only)
- 4) Information specifically agreed to be communicated via social media at Council meetings
- 5) Advertising events and activities that Shrivvenham Parish Council has organised or co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community
- 6) Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area
- 7) Announcing new information relevant to people living in or around the Shrivvenham area
- 8) Providing and exchanging information about local services and events
- 9) Support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- 10) Gathering local resident's insights via consultations
- 11) Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area
- 12) Advertising vacancies
- 13) Share relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.

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- 14) Post 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.
- 15) Refer resident queries via social media to the Clerk for wider dissemination to Councillors if necessary.

Councillors and staff should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response. Shrivenham 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. SPC's social media accounts are primarily a tool to pass information on.

Though SPC is keen to hear residents' views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments, particularly on planning applications. In order to manage the messages received, residents will be asked to forward their comments to SPC if necessary. This can be done by emailing the Parish Clerk, by contacting the Chair of the Parish Council 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.

The Parish Council has delegated authority for posting council information on social media to specific councillors and staff only. Those with delegated authority are responsible for what they post, in a council capacity. Individual Parish Councillors and council staff are responsible for what they post in a personal capacity.

In the main, Councillors and council staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else. Failure to comply with the law may have serious consequences.

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect 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 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. Any participation in a 'private' group on behalf of the council, must be conducted as if attending a meeting on behalf of the council.

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

If in doubt, councillors and staff should obtain permission from the Parish Clerk before interacting on social media, where there is an actual or perceived link between the post and the council, or where there is potential that the social media interaction could be directly or indirectly in breach of this policy.

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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.

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:

- 1) Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative, accurate and balanced. They must never be condescending or 'loud'.
- 2) Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents
- 3) 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).
- 4) Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- 5) Parish councillors and council staff must not:
 - a. Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers.
 - b. 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)
 - c. Present personal opinions as that of Shrivenham 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.
 - d. Express any views which may have a party-political bias
 - e. Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council
 - f. Make false or misleading statements
 - g. Post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council
 - h. Post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
 - i. 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. 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
 - j. 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
 - k. Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
 - l. 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)
 - m. Post any information that infringes the copyright of others
 - n. Post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
 - o. Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence)
 - p. Post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
 - q. Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
 - r. Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity

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Councillors must adhere to this code of conduct, even when posting from a personal social media account, as they remain associated to the council.

Councillor's 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 which contravenes the Localism Act 2011. This 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 Parish Clerk will be responsible for posting content on council website and 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 the Social Media Policy.

The Parish Clerk or any staff 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.

When participating in online communication, SPC will generally allow comments 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.

Comments may be deleted and the holder of an account banned if a comment breaches the conditions set out in 4.5) above.

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 in the promotion of the council social media accounts, such as by posting links to the council page on their personal social media account, 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.

Misuse of social media content that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

This policy will be reviewed on an annual basis.

6. Social Media Process

a. Managing Posts

In line with this policy, posts will be managed by the Parish Clerk, and delegated staff where appropriate.

Social media posts will typically be one of the following:

- Standard, recurring posts: e.g. publicising the next council meeting

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- Ad hoc posts, as requested and agreed in council meetings: e.g. request for volunteers for council projects such as Community Speedwatch
- Posting or reposting an event supported by the SPC or Viscountess Barington Trust (VBT): e.g. performances at the memorial hall where SPC/VBT receive a portion of the funds

In order to optimise reach and engagement, posts will typically include a relevant image (subject to copyright laws, as per the Code of Conduct).

b. Post Interactions

Posts will permit interaction, such as reactions, comments and sharing, depending on the platform parameters. Individual Comments in breach of our Code of Conduct may be deleted, and the facility to permit comments may be deactivated, at the absolute discretion of the Parish Clerk.

Councillors and staff not authorised to post on behalf of the council, may “interact” with a council post (react or comment), ensuring adherence with the Code of Conduct. However, posts should only be shared by councillors or staff with the express permission of the Parish Clerk.

All councillors and staff should ensure personal social media accounts are not associated or affiliated directly or indirectly with the council. It is therefore recommended that the following disclaimer is clearly accessible on the personal social media account: *“The views posted here represent my own and are not attributed to any other person or organisation.”*

c. Direct Messaging

Direct messaging is discouraged, as it is an unregulated method of private communication. Therefore, Direct Messages may not be responded to.

Where a response is made, typically it will include a request for the originator to resend their message via email, to the appropriate councillor or staff (typically Parish Clerk, SPC Chairperson or VBT Chairperson), or raise at a council meeting.

A direct response to a question will typically only be made where the response is already in the public domain (such as in published notes from a previous council meeting) and does not encourage further communication through direct messaging.

c. Managing Pages/Accounts

Social Media pages will be reviewed by the Parish Clerk regularly, typically no less than once per year, to ensure all general informal is accurate and admin access is restricted appropriately.