

Devizes Town Council
Social Media Policy

Revised 27-09-2022

1. Social Media

As an organisation and as individuals we use social media to help make information available to a wide group of people using a variety of websites and online tools. As a town council we use social media as a way to keep our community up-to-date with what we are doing in an unbiased format and this also provides opportunities for the community to contact the Town Council and give us feedback on our performance and decision-making strategies.

You may occasionally come across other profiles that appear to provide information from the Town Council but are operated by individuals or groups that are unrelated to Devizes Town Council.

As individual Councillors and members of staff, social media is an important way of ensuring we are kept up-to-date with local and national affairs and to share local information with one other; however as an elected member or member of staff you will always be seen foremost by the members of our community as linked to the Council even when commenting as a private individual and therefore it is expected that you do so in a way that is accurate, un-biased and does not contain information you have no authority to share.

2. Policy Intent

This policy is intended to help staff and elected Councillors make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn etc.

This policy outlines the standards the Council expects both staff and Councillors to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which posting will be brought into review and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

For employees, this policy does not form part of any contract of employment and it may be amended at any time.

2.1 Who is covered by the policy

This policy covers all individuals working at all levels and grades, including councillors, senior managers, officers and all other staff both full and part time.

3. Rules and Guidelines

Rules about the type of content Devizes Town Council will accept on its social media pages.

A post may not be published or may be deleted if they meet any of these criteria:

- Comments that are not related to the article being discussed
- Comments that are politically motivated
- Profane language or content
- Material that perpetuates or promotes discrimination of protected characteristics. These characteristics can include but are not limited to, race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, pregnancy and maternity, marriage or civil partnership or gender reassignment
- Offensive sexual content or links to such content
- Solicitation of commerce
- Illegal conduct or encouragement or support of illegal activities
- Information that compromises or may compromise the safety or security of the public or public systems
- Content that violates the legal ownership or interests of any other party

Devizes Town Council reserves the right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of this social media policy or any applicable law.

4. Social Media Etiquette

Social media allows people great freedom in how they communicate and express themselves. To help ensure everyone can benefit from social media sites, Councillors and Employees are expected to abide by the following principles:

- To tell the truth
- To write with accuracy
- To acknowledge and correct mistakes promptly
- To preserve the original post, using notations to show where changes have been made to maintain the integrity of the information
- To never delete a post, although a poster could delete their own post and repost to correct information where there is an error such as an incorrect link, providing no one has liked or commented on it
- Not to delete comments unless they do not meet the requirements of this policy
- To reply to emails and comments when appropriate, and to do so promptly
- To strive for high quality with every post - including basic spellchecking
- To stay on topic
- To disagree with other opinions respectfully

- To link to online references and original source materials directly
- To disclose all conflicts of interest
- To keep private issues and topics separate from other issues and topics

5. RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

The Town Clerk, in conjunction with the Mayor, is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for changes.

All councillors and staff are responsible for their own compliance with this policy and for ensuring that it is consistently applied. All councillors and staff should ensure that they take the time to read and understand it. Any breach of this policy should be reported to the Town Clerk or in his absence to the Office Manager.

Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Town Clerk.

Where a minor breach in the policy is discovered, the Councillor or members of staff will be given the opportunity to correct the error immediately; however, if a formal complaint is received then this may result in a formal referral to the Monitoring Officer for Councillors and a disciplinary hearing for staff

Members of staff should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for work purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, disciplinary action may be taken, and these may be considered to be gross misconduct.

6. RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER COUNCIL DOCUMENTS AND POLICIES

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following guidance and policy documents.

- Elected Members Code of Conduct
- The Town Council's Dignity in the Workplace
- The Council's Disciplinary and Grievance Policies
- Devizes Town Council Guidance on social media for Councillors and Staff

Devizes Town Council

Social media guidance for Councillors and Staff

September 2022

This document does a supplement to the Social Media Policy as guidance for both Councillors and Staff.

Introduction

Social media is the term used for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This guidance covers social media issues over the internet and by email, smart phones, all social networking sites, blogging, tweeting and other platforms that may come forward in the future.

Social media increases our access to audiences and improves the accessibility of our communication. It enables us to be more active in our relationships with members of the community, partners and stakeholders and encourages people to be involved in local decision making, enabling better engagement and feedback, ultimately helping to improve the services we provide and awareness of the impact of decision making.

For the purposes of this guidance, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this guidance.

Devizes Town Council acknowledges social media as a useful tool, however guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure they are used effectively and that their use does not expose the council to security risks, or breach the Data Protection Act.

Purpose This guidance applies to councillors and staff in respect of their personal use of social media. It sets out how to use social media, how to effectively manage social media usage and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated. The following risks have been identified with social media use (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Social engineering attacks (also known as 'phishing').
- Discrimination, bullying, harassment 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.
- Breach of the Wiltshire Council Member's Code of Conduct through inappropriate use.

In light of these risks, the use of social media sites should be regulated to ensure that such use does not harm the Council, its employees, partners and the people it serves. This guidance aims to ensure:

council information and computer systems/networks remain secure and are not compromised through the use of social media;
users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation.

Responsibilities of councillors and staff

You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media, in the same way that you are responsible for letters or emails you send. Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is harmful to their reputation may incur a libel action.

Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

Make use of stringent privacy settings if you don't want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality/privacy settings.

Do not disclose personal details such as home addresses and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the council's Data Protection Policy Statement.

Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Everyone has a responsibility for protecting and safeguarding children and adults who may be vulnerable. If you have concerns that a child or adult is suffering or is likely to suffer from any form of maltreatment (whether financial, physical, sexual, emotional or neglect) this should be reported in the following ways:

- (a) if a child or vulnerable adult is in immediate danger or left alone, contact the police or call an ambulance on 999;
- (b) in all other cases involving children, referrals should be made to Wiltshire social care services via the Council's 'Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub' (MASH) on 0300 456 0108 (or out of hours via the 'Emergency Duty Service' on 0845 607 0888);
- (c) in all other cases involving adults, referrals should be made to the Council's customer advisers on 0300 456 0111 (or out of hours via the 'Emergency Duty Service'), e-mail customeradvisors@wiltshire.gov.uk

Do not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public are present or it is of a confidential nature) or are "Exempt" reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985).

Copyright laws still apply online. Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g., extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about or seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.

Don't send or post inappropriate, abusive, bullying, racist or defamatory messages to members of the public, other councillors or officers either in or outside the work environment.

The Council will not promote councillors' social media accounts during a pre-election period.

In any biography, the account should state the views are those of the councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council.

Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council related material on a personal account or website.

Social media must not be used for actions that would put councillors in breach of the Members Code of Conduct. For example, don't publish on social media something you wouldn't say face to face, or at a public meeting. For staff, no posting should either bring the Council into disrepute or contradict a democratically made Council decision. Such postings could be seen as a breach of discipline and be subject to disciplinary sanctions.

Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.

Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, Town Clerk and/or the police.

To keep within the Social Media Policy and these Guidelines councillors using Facebook should keep their personal life and their role as a councillor separate by creating separate personal and councillor Facebook pages.

Conduct

Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Members Code of Conduct and relevant law.

This guidance is not exhaustive and if you have any queries, you should contact the monitoring officer.

The council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be incorrect, offensive, inflammatory or libellous.

Principles for using social media

You should follow these five guiding principles for any social media activities:

Be respectful – set the tone for online conversations by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language, be cordial, honest and professional at all

times. Make sure that you respect people's confidentiality – do not disclose non-public information or the personal information of others.

Be credible and consistent – be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications.

Be honest about who you are – it's important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. Be clear about your own personal role.

Be responsive – make an effort to share what you know. Offer insights where appropriate and put people in touch with someone who can help if you can't. Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner.

Be confident – don't be scared of participating. Follow this advice and seek further guidance if you need it. If you're about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, pause to think about it. Feel confident in what you say before you say it – and say it as clearly as you can.

Guidance on capturing social media posts

Posts made using third party sites such as Facebook or Twitter are not held or within the control of the Council - posts can be deleted by site administrators without knowledge or consent of the Council. In exceptional circumstances, copies of posts may be made and retained by the Council, (e.g., as evidence of inappropriate posts) in line with relevant council procedures, (depending on the nature of the allegation). These copies will be held for a period dependent on the type of investigation they are subject to, (e.g., disciplinary, audit, criminal, etc).

Where inappropriate use is suspected, it is suggested that you should pro-actively attempt to capture any inappropriate posts (before they might be deleted). Copies should be made (press, 'alt+Prt Scrn,' and copy into MS Word) and reported to both the relevant authority within the Town Council as well as following the social media sites own reporting procedures where appropriate. Please note that this is just one means of gathering evidence of inappropriate use; it does not preclude the gathering of other types of evidence, e.g., witness statements.

Relationship with Other Council Documents and Policies

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following guidance and policy documents:

- Elected Members Code of Conduct
- The Town Council's Dignity in the Workplace
- The Town Council's Disciplinary and Grievance Policies