



OTTERY ST MARY TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Version	Author	Details	Dates created	Date approved & ref
1	Christine McIntyre	Created and adopted	April 2018	03/04/2018 – Ref 18/04/09
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1. Introduction

1.1 The objective of this policy is to provide Officers and Members an overview of social media and outline Ottery St Mary Town Council's ('the Council's') position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officers' and Members' responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

2. Definition of Social Media

2.1 Social media is a term for online tools, websites and interactive media that enables users to interact with each other in various ways through sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests.

2.2 Social media has the following characteristics:

- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs and audio.
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of devices; computers, phones and tablets.
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information.
- Increases speed and broadens the flow of information.

- Supports communication and engagement with individuals, groups and the wider community.
- Allows communication to take place in real time or intermittently.
- Examples of popular social media tools include Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, TikTok and YouTube.

3. Purpose of the Policy

3.1 Social media provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience in a timely manner on a range of subjects relating to its activities by providing updates, news and information. It also provides an opportunity to communicate with harder to reach groups, such as the younger population and business community.

3.2 The Council will make use of approved social media tools to quickly disseminate information but carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks detailed below.

4. Aims

4.1 Social media can be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

4.2 As with any online activity there are often risks associated; the following types of risk have been identified with social media use:

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Damage to the reputation of the Council.
- Social engineering attacks (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).
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.
- Breach of safeguarding.

4.3 In light of these risks, the Council needs to regulate the use of social media and ensure that such use does not damage the Council, its employees, partners and the people it serves.

4.4 The aim of this Policy is to:

- Strengthen engagement with individuals and communities and promote Council services effectively.
- Ensure a consistent and professional approach to social media use.

- Protect Council information and maintain information security when using social media.
- Ensure compliance with existing policies, guidance and relevant legislation.
- Protect and enhance the Council's reputation.
- Promote effective, timely and appropriate communication, engage with a wider audience, and encourage the use of other Council communication channels (such as the website, press releases and social media platforms).

4.5 Social media should form part of the Council's wider communications approach rather than operate in isolation. Any planned projects, promotions and activities can be plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

5. Policy Statement

5.1 It is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages. The responsible and professional use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to Officers and Members.

5.2 This policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks.

5.3 Users must act responsibly when using social media and avoid any conduct that could harm the Council's reputation, undermine public confidence, disrupt Council activities, or breach Council policies.

5.4 When communicating on behalf of the Council, Officers and Members should consider how information may be understood by residents who do not have access to the same background information, context or knowledge. Communications should be clear, accurate, accessible and written from the perspective of the intended audience in mind, helping to promote public understanding, trust and confidence in the Council.

5.5 The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of the Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
- Users are personally responsible for content they publish on any form of social media on behalf of the Council.
- Never give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's Data Protection Policy.

- Respect copyright, fair-use and financial disclosure laws.
- Social media sites are in the public domain, and it is important to ensure that you are confident about the nature of the information you publish. Permission must be sought if you wish to publish or report on meetings or discussions that are meant to be private or internal to the Council. Don't cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers without their approval.
- Users must communicate respectfully and professionally at all times. Communications should be courteous, constructive and appropriate in tone, even where there is disagreement. Users must not engage in bullying, harassment, discrimination, personal attacks, or behaviour that is intimidating, provocative, disrespectful or likely to cause unnecessary conflict. Users should respect the privacy of others and exercise good judgement when discussing sensitive or contentious issues online.
- Software, shareware or freeware should only be downloaded from social media platforms where this has been approved and authorised by the Town Clerk.
- Use of the Council's social media accounts (including any accounts established in the future) must reflect the Council's agreed position and decisions and must not be used to express personal opinions. Where the Council's position is unclear, content must not be published until clarification has been obtained. All posts must remain non-party political.

6. Use of Council Social Media Channels

6.1 The Council uses social media primarily as a community information and engagement tool. Its purpose is to share information, promote Council services and activities, support community initiatives, and keep residents informed of matters relevant to the local area. Council social media channels are not intended to operate as public discussion forums. Where residents wish to raise concerns, provide feedback, make enquiries or discuss Council matters in detail, they should be encouraged to contact the Council directly by email, telephone, Messenger, or in person at the Council Offices.

6.2 Content published by the Council will normally be shared through the Council's official social media accounts and approved community channels. Members may share Council content to their personal social media accounts. However, Members should not republish, repost or otherwise distribute Council content to community groups or community pages on the Council's behalf. This helps ensure that communications remain consistent, engagement can be monitored effectively, and any enquiries can be managed through the appropriate Council channels.

6.3 The Council will, in most circumstances, restrict or disable comments on its social media posts. The Council reserves the right to enable, restrict, or disable comments where it considers this appropriate. Where comments are enabled on an official Council post, only Officers may respond on behalf of the Council. Responses

should be limited to factual information, clarification of Council services, or directing individuals to a more appropriate communication channel. Members should not engage in public debate regarding Council matters through social media comments.

6.4 Where a Member shares content published by the Council through a personal account, any comments, reactions or discussions arising from that shared post are the responsibility of the account holder and not the Council. Members should ensure that discussions remain respectful and appropriate and should avoid engaging in arguments, disputes or exchanges that may damage public confidence in the Council. Where necessary, Members should consider disabling comments or directing individuals to the appropriate Council contact channels.

7. Guidance for Officers

7.1 Any social media account created on behalf of the Council must be registered using an approved Council email address and remain under the Council's control.

7.2 Officers using social media in a personal capacity must ensure that this use is strictly personal, and not professional or political.

7.3 As members of the public may nevertheless recognise Officers as employees of the Council, Officers should be mindful that their personal use of social media may be associated with the Council and should exercise appropriate judgement when posting online.

7.4 If an officer receives any threats, abuse or harassment from members of the public through their use of social media, then they must report such incidents to the Town Clerk. In the case of the Town Clerk being subjected to this type of behaviour, they must report it to the Mayor.

7.5 Officers should not spend an excessive amount of time while at work using social media and should ensure that its use does not interfere with other duties.

7.6 The Council reserves the right to monitor employees' internet usage, and access may be withdrawn in any case of misuse.

7.7 Failure to comply with the guidelines could result in disciplinary action being taken.

8. Guidance for Members

8.1 Members should be familiar with this policy and the Members' Code of Conduct and ensure that their use of social media reflects the standards and expectations set out within them.

8.2 Members may maintain personal social media accounts but should ensure they are clearly identifiable as personal accounts and do not imply that they represent the Council's views.

8.3 Members should present themselves professionally when using social media and must not disclose confidential information. Information shared should be accurate and based on fact. Members should avoid speculation, exaggeration, inappropriate language or personal criticism that could damage public confidence in the Council or bring the Council into disrepute.