



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Pirton Parish Council

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Doc016.

Chairman: R. Diane Bailey

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Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Purpose	2
3.	Responsibility of Councillors	3
4.	Conduct	4
5.	Administration of Accounts	5
6.	The Council's Response	6
7.	The Parish Council Website.....	6
8.	Parish Council email.	7
9.	Messaging via text (SMS)	7
10.	Video Conference	8

1. Introduction

- a. 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 policy and guidelines cover social media issues over the internet and by email, smart phones, tablets, social networking sites, blogging, and tweeting.
- b. 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 citizens, 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.
- c. For the purposes of this policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), Snapchat, Whatsapp, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where Pirton Parish Council could be represented via online participation.
- d. Pirton Parish Council acknowledges social media as a useful tool, however clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that their use does not expose the Council to security risks, reputational damage or breach

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

2. Purpose

- a. This policy applies to councillors. It gives guidelines on how to use social media, sets out how we can 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.
 - Damage to the Council's reputation.
 - Social engineering attacks (also known as 'phishing').
 - 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.
 - Breach of the Code of Conduct through inappropriate use.
- b. In light of these risks, the use of social media sites should be regulated to ensure that such use does not damage the Council, its employees, councillors, partners and the people it serves. As such this policy aims to ensure:
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media.
 - Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media.
 - Users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation.
 - The Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

c. Policy statement

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.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with Parish Council policy. They must ensure that their use will not adversely affect the

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

Council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

3. Responsibility of Councillors

- a. You are personally responsible for the content you 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 incur a libel action.
- b. 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.
- c. Make use of stringent privacy settings if you do not 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.
- d. Do not disclose personal details such as home addresses and telephone numbers.
- e. 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 Part 2 reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985).
- f. 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.
- g. Do not 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.
- h. The Council will not promote councillors' social media accounts during the pre-election period.
- i. In any biography, the account should state that the views are those of the councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council.
- j. Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council-related material on a personal account or website.

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

- k. Social media must not be used for actions that would put councillors in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct. For example, do not publish on social media something you would not say face to face, or at a public meeting.
- l. Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.
- m. Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Parish Clerk and/or the police.
- n. It is recommended that in the case of Facebook, councillors wishing to keep their personal life and role as a councillor separate create a Facebook page which members of the public can like rather than using a personal profile.

4. Conduct

- a. Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Code of Conduct and relevant law.
- b. The following guidance is not exhaustive and if you have any queries you should contact the Parish Clerk.
- c. Failure to comply with this policy or breaches of this policy may amount to a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct.
- d. Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), could lead to fines being issued and possible criminal or civil action being taken against the Council or the individual(s) involved.
- e. The Council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the Code of Conduct.
- f. **Principles for using social media**

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

- i. 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.
- ii. 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.
- iii. Be honest about who you are – it is important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. Be clear about your own personal role.

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

- iv. 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 cannot. Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner (make sure you manage user expectations for the type of social media that you are using – e.g. the Council publishes its social media policy).
 - v. Be confident – do not be scared of participating. Follow these rules and seek further guidance if you need it. If you are 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.
- g. Guidance on capturing social media posts**
- i. Posts made using third party sites such as Facebook or X (formerly known as Twitter) are not held or within the control of the Council - posts can be deleted by site administrators without the 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).
 - ii. 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 of the screen should be captured as appropriate (for example, screen grab or snipping tool) and reported to both the Parish Clerk, as well as following the social media site's 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.

5. Administration of Accounts

- a The Parish Council will try to respond to as many replies and comments as possible, however it is not always possible to do so.
- b There will be times when the Council will 'like' or 'follow' an account in order to take part in conversations, however, just because the Council likes or follows an account, or retweets or shares information, it does not mean that the Council endorses that account.
- c Conversely, if the Council does not like or follow an account it does not necessarily mean the Council is not interested in the content of that account.
- d The Council will on occasion like or follow people who provide information pertinent to the Council's work (e.g. central government accounts, local media, etc) or those whose information can be passed on for the benefit of local residents.
- e The Council retains the right to block an account, if that account has liked the Council purely to promote a product or service, or the account has

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

- contravened the rules of a particular social media space.
- f The Council may unfollow accounts for any reason and without prejudice.
 - g The Council will always attempt to follow individual communities' rules and guidelines and, where possible, will rely on the measures and intervention which the social networking site already has in place (e.g. against illegal, harmful or offensive content), for example by flagging comments or alerting them to any breaches of the site's terms and conditions.
 - h The Council retains the right to remove comments or content that includes:
 - i. Obscene or racist comment
 - ii. Personal attacks, insults or threatening language
 - iii. Bullying
 - iv. Potentially libellous statements
 - v. Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
 - vi. Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
 - vii. Commercial promotions or spam
 - viii. Alleges a breach of the Council's policy or the law.
 - ix. Any other comments deemed unsuitable by the Council.

6. The Council's Response

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of the Council's policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given the limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page.

The Council may post a statement that '*A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed*'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

7. The Parish Council Website

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive, particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group will be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's 'rules and expectation' for the website. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the web site if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's 'rules and expectation' for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

8. Parish Council email.

The Clerk to the council has their own council email address (parishclerk@pirtonparishcouncil.org.uk). The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can. An 'out of office' message will be used when appropriate.

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, and if appropriate, copy to the Clerk. NB any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act.

These procedures should ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

No personal information should be forwarded on to other people or groups outside the Council. This includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

9. Messaging via text (SMS)

Members and the Clerk may use SMS (for example, direct text, Whatsapp, Messenger) as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

Pirton Parish Council



SOCIAL MEDIA & ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Doc016

2024.05

10. Video Conference

If this medium (for example, Zoom, Skype, MS Teams, Google meet) is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.