



WESTGATE-ON-SEA TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

ADOPTED Review due 07/2024

This policy covers all Councillors, employees & volunteers of Westgate-on-Sea Town Council.

Policy Statement

This policy is intended to help staff and members of Westgate-on-Sea Town Council make appropriate decisions about the use of internet and social media such as blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts and other media sharing services, forums, message boards, or comments on websites such as X, Facebook and LinkedIn

This policy outlines the standards which should be observed when using social media, the circumstances in which use of social media will be monitored and the action which will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

This policy is intended to:

- Introduce various forms of social media
- Set down rules governing the basic use of social media
- Provide guidance in relation to the use of social media and to highlight some of the pitfalls to avoid.
- All Councillors and employees are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of Westgate-on-Sea Town Council.
- Only those persons authorised by the Town Clerk are permitted to post material, or use the Council's logo, heading or imagery on social media websites in the Council's name and on its behalf.

1. Introduction

- 1.2 Residents are increasingly expecting that local government will provide its services online. Many Councillors and Councils are now interacting with the people they represent online through social media.
- 1.3 However, there are challenges that may discourage Councillors and Councils from engaging in social media use. For example, inappropriate use, (which may occur inadvertently) can cause significant damage to the Council's reputation and even lead to legal claims. In addition, the technology involved is changing at a fast pace. This can mean that it is hard to keep up and maintain useful interaction with residents.

- 1.4 The problem councils now face is that if they do not engage online, residents will still use these networks to talk about councils, whether they add their voice to the conversation or not. Residents will expect their councils to engage with them on their terms, via their channels, and to be openly available online. It has become increasingly clear that if councils do not use these tools, the residents will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.

2. What is Social Media?

- 2.1 Social media describes a range of online services which provide easy ways to create and publish on the internet. The term is generally used to describe how content (i.e. text, video and pictures) can be shared and discussed online. As a result, social media is changing the way in which Councillors and Councils interact with local people.
- 2.2 The important thing to remember about social media is that it is social. It is about communication and about putting the power of the printing press into the hands of the people. Social media will have a far-reaching effect on the way we govern and do business.
- 2.3 Nowadays anyone can publish and share their views, and more importantly can engage in conversation with others about those views, with just a few clicks of a mouse.

2.4 Examples of social media:-

a) Facebook – mainly a website which allows users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues

b) X – for telling people what one is doing or thinking – these short messages which you post are called “Tweets”.

Top tip: Follow and be followed. X is a great tool

c) Instagram – for showing people pictures

d) YouTube – for showing people videos

e) LinkedIn – for work networking

f) Blogs which are like an online diary journal where you can share information. Examples are WordPress and Blogger

Top tip: Share your thoughts and activities, and comment on the issues that mean the most to you. Encourage feedback and create dialogue to help your blog evolve.

g) Micro blogs allow users to share shorter pieces of information. X is an example of a micro-blog.

3. Avoiding trouble on social media

- 3.1 Any form of communication carries with it the possibility of misunderstanding. Social media is especially vulnerable to this. A comment which would be seen as harmlessly humorous in normal conversation could be seen as seriously offensive on X.
- 3.2 Councillors should bear in mind that the problems which arise from social media often stem from users forgetting two key characteristics of social media:
- 3.3 What is said is permanently published to the world – once something is online it is nearly impossible to take it back. As it is attributed to an individual, their name, (and that of the Council) could be forever tarnished.
- 3.4 Posts can easily be misinterpreted and taken out of context as people reading or viewing them may not be aware of the background of the issue which is being discussed.
- 3.5 Council staff and Councillors should be careful about internet security. Losing control of a social media account to a hacker could lead to inappropriate comments being published in the Council's name.

4. Legal considerations

- 4.1 This section does not purport to be a complete assessment of all the legal pitfalls that may catch out a social media user, but it highlights some of the main concerns. Any questions or concerns in relation to a particular issue should be raised with the Town Clerk. Everything said online must be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

5. Libel

- 5.1 If an untrue statement is published by a Councillor or a Council employee about a person which is damaging to that person's reputation they may take a libel action. This will apply also if someone else is allowed to publish something libellous on a Council website if a Councillor or Council employee knows about it and does not take prompt action to remove it.
- 5.2 Copyright Placing images or text on any of the Council's websites from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without first seeking permission is a breach of copyright. Councillors and Council employees must avoid publishing anything they are unsure about.
- 5.3 Data Protection and Confidentiality. The publishing of personal data of individuals unless their written permission has first been obtained is not permitted.
- 5.4 In addition, some information Councillors receive in your role as Councillors will be subject to confidentiality. This sort of material is not to be published online.

5.5 Obscene or offensive material - No material should be published that contains anything that people would consider obscene or offensive. Publication of obscene material (and some types of offensive material) is a criminal offence.

6. The Council's use of social media

6.1 Material published by the Council is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content.

6.2 It must not:

- a) Contain party political material
- b) Persuade the public to a particular political view
- c) Promote the personal image of a particular Councillor or party
- d) Promote an individual Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations or personalise issues

6.3 In addition, the Council should not assist (such as by re-tweeting) the publication of any of the above.

6.4 It is acknowledged that social media channels are now used by many residents for communication and finding information. Therefore, Council materials may refer to the social media accounts of Councillors as a means of contacting that Councillor.

7. What does the Council consider to be inappropriate or offensive?

7.1 The Council will not tolerate inappropriate or offensive use of social media and will take action against anyone found to have made any such comments. For Councillors, this could result in comments being reported as a breach of Standing Orders or Councillors' Code of Conduct.

7.2 It is impossible to write a list of everything that could be seen as inappropriate or offensive. Below is a list of examples of the type of comment or material that might fall into this category.

7.3 Social media should not be used in a way that:

7.4 Breaches confidentiality for example by:

- Revealing confidential or commercially sensitive information belonging to the Council;
- Giving away personal or confidential information about an individual (such as a fellow Councillor or officer) or organisation (such as a service provider or partner authority)
- Improperly discussing the Council's internal workings (such as agreements that it is reaching or its future plans that have not been communicated to the public)

- Does anything that could be reasonably considered insulting, threatening, discriminatory against, or bullying or harassment of any individual for example by:
- Making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality) disability, sexual orientation religion, age or:
- Using social media to bully another individual (such as an officer or service user of the Council; or
- Posting images or comments that are offensive, obscene or links to such content or:
- Brings the Council into disrepute for example by:
- Making defamatory comments about the Council, individuals or other organisation or groups;
- Promotes illegal activity or is intended to deceive or:
- Breaches copyright, for example by:
- Using someone else's images or written content without permission; or
- Failing to give acknowledgement where permission has been given to reproduce something
- In cases where there is doubt as to whether content is appropriate the Town Clerk should be consulted before posting.

8 Responsibilities of Councillors

8.1 You are personally responsible for any content that you publish on any form of social media as described above. 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 for which you will be personally liable.

- Be aware that social media sites are in the public domain, it is important to ensure you are confident of the validity and nature of the information you publish. Make use of privacy settings if you do not want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Do not disclose personal details and ensure that you manage any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's data protection policy.
- Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business – if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.
- Do not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public or press are present, or it is of a confidential nature).

- 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 a work environment.
- 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.
- Please do not post information relating to individual officers.
- Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you or others vulnerable.
- Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, the Monitoring Officer and/or the police.

9. Conduct

9.1 Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Code of Conduct for Councillors. You are acting in your "official capacity" and any conduct may fall within the Code whenever you:

- Conduct business of the Authority; or
- Act as a representative of the Authority, or
- Claim to act or give the impression you are acting as a representative of the Authority;

9.2 Breaches of this policy may amount to a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct. Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act, could lead to fines being issued and possible criminal or civil action being taken against the Council, or the individual(s) involved.

9.3 The Council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the code of conduct for members.

10. Social Media Issues Which are specific to Councillors

- 10.1 Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are certain restrictions on using social media websites for electoral campaigning and extra care also needs to be taken when writing on planning, licensing and other regulatory matters.

- 10.2 This section looks at some issues that are particularly relevant to the life and work of a Councillor and builds on the principles set out in Section 3.
- 10.3 Personal use of social media This guide considers the use of social media by Councillors in the context of social media accounts and Members' "public" accounts.
- 10.4 It is sometimes hard for Councillors to separate their public and private lives. The Council is of the view that Councillors should operate separate "public" and "private" social media accounts to maintain their personal privacy.
- 10.5 Councillors should refrain from mentioning anything Council-related on their private social media accounts as the Code of Conduct can still apply.
- 10.6 Allow disagreements but avoid arguments - Some comments may be inappropriate but deleting the comments of people who disagree with Members will often backfire. Councillors cannot stop them from posting the same comments elsewhere, then linking back to a Councillor's site and saying the Council is gagging those who disagree. It is not necessary to respond to everything. Comments can be ignored if necessary.

11. Electoral periods

- 11.1 The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature, including web advertising.
- 11.2 Members' Code of Conduct - Councillors should not use their private social media accounts to express opinions which might give the impression they are acting as a Councillor, as this online activity may be subject to the Code of Conduct.
- 11.3 Aspects of the Councillors' Code of Conduct will apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.
- 11.4 Councillors need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:
- Treat others with respect.
 - Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
 - Comply with equality laws.
 - Take care in publishing anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist or anti-faith.
 - Refrain from publishing anything received in confidence.
 - Ensure the Council, or the role of Councillor, is not brought into disrepute.
- 11.5 If there is any doubt about any online issues, the Town Clerk should be contacted.

12. Monitoring and review of this policy

12.1 The Full Council is responsible for reviewing this policy annually, or as and when required to ensure it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.

12.2 The following Council Codes and Policies should be considered alongside this policy:

- Standing Orders
- Members' Code of Conduct
- Equalities and Diversity Policy
- Press and Media Policy
- Email Policies
- Request for Information Policy
- Data Protection Policy