

WATCHFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

Social and Digital Media Policy

2023-2024

Purpose

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to staff and Councillors in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media.

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Parish Council website
- Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Blogs and discussion forums
- Parish Council emails

Who does it apply to?

The principles of the policy apply to Councillors and Clerk.

The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.

Council use of social media

The use of social media will not replace existing forms of communication. Notices will continue to be published on the Parish Council's noticeboards for the purpose of communicating information about the Parish Council to those who do not have access to computers/tablets, smartphones etc.

Principles

- To publish information about the Parish Council to a wider audience.
- To avoid entering into online debates or arguments about the Council's work. Social Media must NOT be used in the recruitment process for employees or new Councillors – other than for the sole purpose of placing vacancy advertisements – as this could lead to potential discrimination and privacy actions, as well as breach of data protection issues.

Approved Parish Council social media

- Parish Council website www.watchfield.org. The Clerk and Chairman is responsible for updating the website.
- Parish Council emails: clerk@watchfield.org and councillor emails name.surname@watchfield.org

The Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received. The procedure for the sending of email from the Parish Council to local residents, businesses and organisations is that they will be sent by the Clerk. Where Councillors need to communicate with local residents, businesses and organisations they should, preferably, send their email to the Clerk of the Council or where for reasons of expediency this is not practical the email concerned must be copied to the Clerk. This procedure ensures that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

- Parish Council Twitter account @
- Parish Council Facebook Page ;
- Parish Council Instagram;

The Social Media Councillor is responsible for communicating information through social media

Guidance for using social media

- Councillors using social media in an official capacity as a Councillor, should always be mindful of the Council's Code of Conduct and of the seven Nolan principles applicable to holding public office – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

- Councillors should make it clear that views are their own views and not necessarily those of Council as a body with a statement such as 'The views expressed are my own and do not reflect the views of Watchfield Parish Council'.
- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted for use during meetings. Ensure the volume on all electronic devices are turned to 'mute'.
- Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it's not appropriate to tweet/blog during Council meetings.
- Councillors should remember that if they break the law using social media (for example posting something defamatory) they will be personally responsible.

Users of Council Social Media - Press

The Clerk is the Council's nominated Press Officer with the authority to issue official press releases. No other member of staff has the authority to issue public statements on behalf of the Council.

When participating in any online communication:

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council. Never make false or misleading statements.
- Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. Be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council or bring the Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other policies.
- Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud'. Use sentence case format, no capital letters or write in red to emphasis a point.
- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, sex, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications. If Councillors/Clerk encounters a situation that threatens to become antagonistic, Councillors/Clerk should disengage from dialogue in a polite manner.
- Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
- Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- Respect the privacy of other Councillors and residents.
- Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations.
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise the Council policies or personnel.
- No information should be published that is not already known to be in the public domain – ie. available on the Council's website, contained in minutes of meetings, stated in Council publicised policies and procedures, etc.

Councillors or residents who have any concerns regarding content place on social media sites should report them to the Clerk. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

Guidance for using email

- The Clerk to the council has their own council email address clerk@watchfield.org
- 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.
- 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. All new Emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with a Data consent form for completion before action is taken with that correspondence.

- Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published email address which is used for council business. Councillors must have separate council and personal email addresses and adhere to the Council's Code of Conduct.
- Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, 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 will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept. Do not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

Guidance for using SMS (texting)

Members and the Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times. All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

Guidance for using Video Conferencing e.g. ZOOM

If this medium is used to communicate please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

Internal communication and access to information within the Council

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.