

Malpas Parish Council - Social Media Policy

Introduction:

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice is to provide guidance to Malpas Parish Councillors in the use of online communications, usually referred to as social media, which is a collective term 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):

- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Parish Council E-mails
- Parish Council Website – Sees separate Malpas Cheshire Online policy

The principles of the Policy apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to the Council. It is also intended for guidance for anyone communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.

The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Monthly report in Malpas Parish News will remain the main media for the purpose of communicating information about the Parish Council's activities to the community.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way they do to other written or verbal communication. Content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What is written on in social media may be permanent. E.G. if you put something on the internet there is no guarantee you can delete it later as someone may have copied it or forwarded it.

In the main, councillors have the same legal status online as anyone else, and failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional responsibilities around using their websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters. See advice from IDeA below.

The Parish Council may use social media to:

- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Report good news stories that are linked to a web or press page
- Advertise Councillor vacancies
- Share information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.
- Announcing relevant community information
- Share information from other parish related community groups. I.e. clubs/associations/schools, etc.

In all circumstances individual Parish councillors are responsible for what they publish or post.

Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used for council business.

Councillors are strongly advised to have separate council and personal email addresses.

Guidance when using all forms of social media:

All material if deemed helpful to local people and in the public interest should always be published in a sensitive manner.

When participating in any online communication all contributors should:-

- a. Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
- b. Never knowingly make false or misleading statements.
- c. Not present themselves in a way that might potentially damage the reputation of other people, or the community.
- d. Be mindful of the information being posted and make sure personal opinions are not published to give impression as being that of an organisation.
- e. Avoid material that might bring the Parish Council into disrepute or is contrary to this policy.
- f. Keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative, never condescending or “loud.” Use sentence case format, not capital letters, and write in red only to emphasise forthcoming dates if necessary.
- g. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site
- h. Avoid personal attacks, online disputes and hostile communications.
- i. Never use an individual’s name nor disclose information relating to another person unless you have written permission to do so, or in exceptional circumstances it is in the public interest to do so.
- j. Obtain permission to publish photographs or videos from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- k. Not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, or be libellous and infringe copyright.
- l. Correct any errors promptly once they have been notified of them.
- m. Respect the privacy of other councillors and residents.

Message Handling: (See Separate Policy statement)

The Clerk and Councillors should note that not all communication requires a response.

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

The Policy will be reviewed annually.

Approved on 11th November 2019

Additional background information (IDeA) 2010

Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

Copyright

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

Obscene material

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website.

Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk
www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents

The council's legal position

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Members' Code of Conduct

Councillors can have 'blurred identities, you may have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor.

Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is the need to get social media accounts/ profiles clear, to be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing the Parish Council.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically.

There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the council, for example blogging as a councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a councillor. That stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most councillors are using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. **Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role.**

Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their council, local police service or councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you.

Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way. Bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance.

Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake; perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

- Avoid the trolls

Malpas Parish Council adopted 11th November 2019