

Henlow Parish Council

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

- 1.1. Social Media provides the Council with important opportunities to communicate to a wider audience (i.e., different age groups, the business community and difficult to reach groups) in relation to its activities and to provide updates, news and community information.
- 1.2. The Council must carefully control its use of social media to minimise risk to the Council.
- 1.3. The objective of this Policy is to outline Henlow Parish Council's ("the Council") position on various aspects of the use of social media by its Councillors and employees and the Policy applies equally to Councillors and employees.
- 1.4. Key points to note:
 - 1.4.1. The Council has its own Facebook page ("the Facebook Page").
 - 1.4.2. The content of the Facebook Page will be managed by the Clerk and Deputy Clerk.
 - 1.4.3. Councillors must exercise caution when posting content online that is linked with the Council's objectives and views.
 - 1.4.4. Individual Councillors should not make statements on behalf of the Council to avoid misrepresentation except with the express prior written permission of the Clerk or Deputy Clerk.

2. DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 2.1. For the purposes of this policy "Social Media" is defined as websites and applications based on user participation and user-generated content including social networking sites and other sites centred on user interaction. For example: Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, Snapchat, Wikipedia, YouTube, Pinterest and LinkedIn. This list is not exhaustive and is given for illustration only.
- 2.2. Social Media has the following characteristics:
 - ☐ Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
 - ☐ Allows messages to flow between many different types of devices such as PCs, phones and tablets.
 - ☐ Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information.
 - ☐ Speeds and broadens the flow of information
 - ☐ Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
 - ☐ Allows communication to take place in real time or intermittently.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 3.1. The aims of this Policy are to: -
 - ☐ Facilitate the Council's engagement with parishioners and the local community through the use of social media;

- ☐ Ensure a consistent approach is adopted and maintained by Councillors and employees in the use of social media;
- ☐ Ensure that confidential Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media;
- ☐ Ensure that Councillors and employees operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation when using social media;
- ☐ Ensure that the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected.

4. CONSIDERATIONS

4.1. Whilst social media is very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are some points Councillors and employees must be aware of:

- ☐ The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. You do not even need to register in many cases to view the content. Registering is often required, but not always compulsory, should you wish to participate and post to the site.
- ☐ Groups on specific themes can be set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth, and ill-informed comment or gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- ☐ The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately, and it is all too easy to respond instantaneously which can result in unintentionally inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience. Friends of Friends may not be our Friends.
- ☐ It is also very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

4.2. When using social media, Councillors and employees should be guided by the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

4.3. The Council's employees could face disciplinary action if they fail to have proper conduct when using Social Media sites when Council matters are the subject matter.

4.4. Allegations that a Councillor has breached this policy may result in referral to the Standards Process as a contravention of the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

4.5. In the event of misuse of a Council social media account, it will be shut down and/or the access will be blocked.

4.6. Appropriate action under other Council policies could be taken as a result of misuse of social media.

4.7. For the purposes of this policy misuse might be considered as, but is not limited to, one or more of the following:

- 4.7.1. Using social media for personal gain or to solicit business for personal gain.
- 4.7.2. Publishing materials that might be considered inappropriate or offensive.
- 4.7.3. Behaving in manner that might be considered inappropriate or offensive.

4.7.4. Publishing materials considered to be defamatory or to the detriment of the Council and/or the public perception of the Council.

5. USE OF INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

The following guidelines set out the standards of behaviour expected from Councillors and employees when using their individual Social Media accounts: -

- 5.1. Ensure that you use social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.
- 5.2. Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in this Policy.
- 5.3. Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- 5.4. Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
- 5.5. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act 2018.
- 5.6. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as: *"Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions"*.
- 5.7. Avoid use of the Council e-mail address, logos or other Council identification.
- 5.8. Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the Council and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- 5.9 Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available, but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view.
- 5.10 Councillors should always present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

6 GENERAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

6.1. The following good practice guidelines should be taken into consideration in the use of social media by the Council as a body or Councillors as individuals.

- 6.1.1 As a Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
- 6.1.2 Take care when posting anything online, because there is no way of removing the information from circulation even after the original has been deleted.
- 6.1.3 Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.
- 6.1.4 Do not post images that include minors without parental permission.
- 6.1.5 Pay close attention to the platform's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the platform.
- 6.1.6 Only add statements approved by either Full Council or the Clerk.

- 6.1.7 Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous.
- 6.1.8 Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterisations.
- 6.1.9 Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at the Council at risk.
- 6.1.10 Be vigilant against phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page.
- 6.1.11 If you find information on the social networking site that falls under mandatory reporting guidelines, then you must report it as required by law.
- 6.2 Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

7 RESPONSIBILITIES

The Clerk and Deputy Clerk are the designated 'Council' owner of any Social Media channels agreed by the Council and will manage any access.

8 OTHER COUNCIL SOCIAL MEDIA

- 8.1 At this stage it is not intended to use any other forms of social media other than Facebook for official use by the Council however, this could be open to review in the future.
- 8.2 Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media available to them that they wish but must always abide by this Policy when so doing.

9 PURDAH

- 9.1 In the six-week run up to an election (local or general) all councils must be very careful not to do or say anything that could be seen in any way to support any political party or candidate. This period is known as purdah.
- 9.2 The Council will continue to publish important service announcements using social media during purdah but may have to remove responses if they are overtly party political.
- 9.3 Elected members and members up for election are asked not to post on the Council social media accounts during purdah.

Adopted at Full Council on 10th November 2025

To be reviewed by end November 2027 or following updated guidelines from NALC

