



SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

As adopted at a meeting of Meppershall Parish Council on 12th June 2023

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DOCUMENT CONTROL

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DOCUMENT AMENDMENT HISTORY

Revision No.	Originator of change	Date of change	Change Description
V1.0	Clerk	09/03/20	Policy creation
V1.1	IT Working Group	14/06/21	Minor amendments to wording

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The objective of this Policy is to provide Councillors, employees and persons authorised to access Meppershall Parish Councils' ("the Council" or "MPC") with an overview of Social Media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of its use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officer and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.
- 1.2. Key notes:
 - 1.2.1. MPC has a Facebook page where information will be made available.
 - 1.2.2. Content will be curated by the Clerk and nominated Councillor(s).
 - 1.2.3. Councillors with social media accounts are encouraged to promote information within their own networks.
 - 1.2.4. Councillors must exercise caution when posting content online that is linked with MPC work.
 - 1.2.5. Any statements offered on behalf of MPC by an individual Councillor must first be approved by the Clerk or Full Council to avoid misrepresentation.
 - 1.2.6. If in doubt, don't make the post until approval is received.

2. DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- 2.1. Social media is a term for websites and applications based on user participation and user-generated content. They include social networking sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction. 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 device; PCs, phones and tablets (e.g. iPad)
 - 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.
- 2.2. Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, Snapchat, Wikipedia, YouTube, Pinterest and LinkedIn.

3. PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

- 3.1. Social media provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience on a range of subjects relating to its activities, providing updates, news, information and retweeting relevant information from other sources. It also provides an opportunity to communicate with the younger age group, the business community and hopefully the harder to reach groups. The Council will make use of approved social media tools to quickly

disseminate information but carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks as stated above. Initially this will be limited to Meppershall Noticeboard, the village Facebook group.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

4.1. Social media can be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity. The aim of this Policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Council based services through the use of social media
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
- That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected
- That communication by use of social media is effective, timely, appropriate, useful, engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (e.g. website, village magazine, linking Facebook to Twitter account etc.)

4.2. Social media activity is not something which stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities will be posted on social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

5. PITFALLS

5.1. Whilst social media tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are some pitfalls to 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 only required 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 and 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.

- 5.2. When using social media for work purposes, MPC councillors, officers and employees should be guided by MPC's Code of Conduct.
- 5.3. MPC employees could face disciplinary action if they fail to have proper conduct on social media sites. This applies at work and at home when MPC matters or employees are the subject matter.
- 5.4. Allegations that MPC Councillors have breached this policy may result in referral to the Standards Process as a contravention of the Members Code of Conduct.
- 5.5. In the event of misuse of an MPC social media account, it will be shut down and/or the Councillor's or employee's access will be blocked.
- 5.6. Appropriate action under other MPC policies could be taken as a result of misuse of social media.
- 5.7. For the purposes of this policy misuse might be considered as, but is not limited to, one or more of the following:
 - 5.7.1. Using a site/tool for personal gain or to solicit business for personal gain.
 - 5.7.2. Publishing materials that might be considered inappropriate or offensive.
 - 5.7.3. Behaving in manner which is considered to be inappropriate or offensive.
 - 5.7.4. Publishing materials considered to be defamatory or to the detriment of MPC and/or the public perception of MPC.

6. POLICY STATEMENT AND GUIDANCE

- 6.1. It is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to councillors, employees and persons authorised to access the Council's social media accounts.
- 6.2. 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/security measures.
- 6.3. Users must ensure that they 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.
- 6.4. The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Meppershall Parish Council:
 - 6.4.1. Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
 - 6.4.2. Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
 - 6.4.3. Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
 - 6.4.4. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act 2018.

- 6.4.5. Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council.
- 6.4.6. Avoid use of the Council e-mail address, logos or other Council identification.
- 6.4.7. 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".
- 6.4.8. Know your obligations: you must comply with other Council policies when using social media.
- 6.4.9. Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- 6.4.10. Use of the Parish Council's Facebook account must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion, particularly when used by a Councillor. If unsure, say nothing.
- 6.4.11. Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as persona and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view.
- 6.4.12. 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

7. RESPONSIBILITIES

- 7.1. The Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of the Council Social Media channels agreed by the Council.
- 7.2. Councillors or volunteers officially appointed by the Council may assist the Clerk to disseminate information however, all must ensure they follow this Policy.
- 7.3. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Clerk.

8. GUIDANCE FOR COUNCILLORS – social media and meetings

- 8.1. The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of Meppershall issues and the use of social media can help with this, especially during official Council meetings. Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:
- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted (indeed encouraged) for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Ensure the volume on all electronic devices is turned to 'mute'.

- Use of social media during meetings is not encouraged as it may show disinterest and lack of engagement in the meeting.
- Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members during meetings. Meppershall residents expect debate and to be informed about Council business, not witness petty arguments.

9. FACEBOOK STRATEGY

9.1. Social networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society. The most popular social networks are web-based, commercial, and not purposely designed for parish council use. For individuals, social networking sites provide tremendous opportunities for staying in touch with friends and family. For the Council the sites provide a modern alternative means to communicate with residents of the Parish. Facebook, for example, offers a rich platform allowing you to share unlimited content, including images and videos. Example activity:

- Share articles / blog posts / expertise
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Create surveys to encourage participation from visitors
- Upload images and videos
- Generic news—what’s happening in the area.

9.2. One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “Like” a page or join a group “that share interests and personal news. Accepting invitations to friend others within the Council’s social networking site should only be authorised by the Clerk or delegated Officer of the Council. Good practice guidelines for the use of Facebook by the Council as a body or Councillors as individuals are:

- 9.2.1. As a Parish Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
- 9.2.2. Take care when posting anything online, because there is no way of removing the information from circulation even after the original has been deleted.
- 9.2.3. Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.
- 9.2.4. All activity on the Council Facebook page must follow the Council’s agreed statement of purpose and outcomes for the use of the networking tool.
- 9.2.5. Do not post images that include minors without parental permission.
- 9.2.6. Pay close attention to the platform's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the platform.
- 9.2.7. Only add statements approved by either Full Council or the Clerk.
- 9.2.8. Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous.

- 9.2.9. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterisations.
- 9.2.10. Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at MPC at risk.
- 9.2.11. 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.
- 9.2.12. If you find information on the social networking site that falls under mandatory reporting guidelines, then you must report it as required by law.
- 9.3. Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

10. OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA

- 10.1. At this stage it is not intended to use any other forms of social media other than Facebook for official use by MPC however, this could be open to review in the future.
- 10.2. 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 and acting on behalf of MPC.

11. PURDAH

- 11.1. In the six-week run up to an election (local or general) all councils have to 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.
- 11.2. MPC will continue to publish important service announcements using social media during purdah but may have to remove responses if they are overtly party political.
- 11.3. Elected members and member up or election are asked not to post on MPC social media accounts during purdah.