



# Garstang Town Council Social Media Policy

## 1. Introduction

**1.1** There is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages to the Town Council including offering an easy way of sharing unlimited content, including images and videos.

Social media/websites may be used to

- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Good news stories linked website or press page
- Vacancies
- Retweeting or 'share' information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.
- Announcing new information.
- Post or Share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups
- Refer Garstang resident queries to the clerk and all other councillors

**1.2** Whilst the responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged, Councillors, Officers and employees must 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.

**1.3** The following sets out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Garstang Town Council.

- Remain mindful of the apolitical status of Garstang Town Council.
- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act.
- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Council. Avoid use of the Council e-mail address, logos or other Council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer.
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other Council policies when using social media. For example, you should be careful not to breach Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies.
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.

**1.4** Residents and Councillors should note that not all communication requires a response.

- There may not be immediate responses to communications as they may be discussed by the Town Council and all responses will be agreed by the Town Council.
- The Town Clerk and the full council will be responsible for all final published responses.

- If a matter needs further consideration it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. Again the poster shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case.
- The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Town Clerk directly.
- Some communication from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Town Council meeting. When this is necessary the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting

### **1.5 Pitfalls**

Whilst these 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.

## **2. Policy statement**

**2.1.** This policy is intended to help Garstang Town Council employees and councillors make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, social networking websites, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and any other form of social media

**2.2.** This policy outlines the standards required by councillors and employees to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which your use of social media will be monitored and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

**2.3.** The use of social media is intended to supplement existing forms of communication. Garstang Town Council website, library surgeries, Green Focus and Garstang Courier and direct contact with the clerk will continue to be the main forms of communication from the town council.

**2.4.** There are no immediate plans to introduce a Garstang Town Council Facebook or twitter account however this will be reviewed in 12 months' time.

**2.5.** Councillors and employees may set up their own personal Facebook page(s) as long as it is clearly stated that they are not speaking as Garstang town councillors or employees of Garstang Town Council.

## **3. The scope of the policy**

**3.1.** All employees and councillors are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of our council.

**3.2.** Breach of this policy by councillors will be dealt with under the Town Council adopted code of conduct and employees may be dealt with under our Disciplinary Procedure and, in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal.

## **4. Responsibility for implementation of the policy**

**4.1.** The Town Council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy.

**4.2.** All employees and councillors should ensure that they take the time to read and understand it. Any breach of this policy should be reported to the clerk.

**4.3.** Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the clerk

## **5. Using social media sites in our name**

Only the clerk and mayor together are permitted to post material on a social media website in the council's name and on our behalf.

## **6. Using social media**

**6.1.** The Town Council recognises the importance of the internet in shaping public thinking about our council and community, as is the importance of our councillors and employees being able to join in to help shape local government conversation and direction through interaction in social media.

**6.2.** However before using social media on any matter which might affect the interests of the council you must:

- a) have read and understood this policy
- b) employees and councillors must have sought and gained prior written approval to do so from the clerk and mayor

## **7. Rules for use of social media**

Whenever you are permitted to use social media in accordance with this policy, you must adhere to the following general rules:

**7.1.** Do not upload, post or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.

**7.2.** Any employee or councillor who feels that they have been harassed or bullied, or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague onto a social media website should inform the clerk.

**7.3.** Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the clerk.

**7.4.** Do not upload post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent.

**7.5.** Before you include a link to a third party website, check that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.

**7.6.** When making use of any social media platform, you must read and comply with its terms of use.

**7.7.** Be honest and open, but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the council.

**7.8.** You are personally responsible for content you publish into social media tools.

**7.9.** Don't escalate heated discussions; try to be conciliatory and respectful. Refer problem to the clerk to correct any misrepresentations and to give out factual information direct to person or persons.

**7.10** Don't discuss employees or other councillors without their prior approval.

**7.11** Always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g. politics and religion .

**7.12** Avoid publishing your contact details where they can be accessed and used widely by people you did not

intend to see them, and never publish anyone else's contact details.

## **8. Facebook**

**8.1.** Councillors and employees may set up personal accounts as individuals using any of the tools available but should ensure any posts are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. The following disclaimer must always be used on personal social media pages when referencing Town Council matters:

"Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions".

**8.2.** Councillors and employees should at all times 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.

## **9. Monitoring use of social media websites**

**9.1.** Councillors and employees should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees under our Disciplinary Procedure and councillors must always abide by the Town Council's "Code of Conduct".

**9.2.** Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal

offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against you and us.

**9.3.** In particular a serious case of uploading, posting forwarding or posting a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, whether in a professional or personal capacity, will probably amount to gross misconduct (this list is not exhaustive):

- a) pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature);
- b) a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation;
- c) material which is offensive, obscene
- d) criminal, discriminatory, derogatory or may cause embarrassment to the council, councillors , or our employees;
- e) confidential information about the council or anyone else
- f) any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, and whether for you or the council)
- g) material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person.

Any such action will be addressed under the Town Council's Code of Conduct and for employees under the disciplinary procedure and may result in summary dismissal.

**9.4.** Where evidence of misuse is found we may undertake a more detailed investigation (in accordance with our disciplinary procedure and the Town Council's code of conduct) involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or managers involved in the investigation. If necessary such information may be handed to the police in connection with a criminal investigation.

**9.5.** If you notice any use of social media by other employees or councillors in breach of this policy please report it to the clerk.

## **10. Monitoring and review of this policy**

The clerk and full council shall be responsible for reviewing this policy annually to ensure that it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.

## **11. Good Practice Guidelines**

Good practice guidelines for the use of Facebook by the Council as a body or Councillors as individuals are:

- As a Town Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
- Remember that people classified as "friends" have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.
- Set your profile's security and privacy settings carefully. At a minimum, all privacy settings should be set to "only friends".
- "Friends of friends" and "Networks and Friends" open the content to a large group of unknown people.

- 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.
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission.
- Pay close attention to the site's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site.
- Only add statements approved by either Full Council or the Town Clerk and mayor.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Garstang Town Council at risk.
- To reduce security risks, do not install any external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page.
- If you find information on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law.
- Stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies
- Use of the Town 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.

## **12. Additional background information**

### • **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.

### • **Obscene material**

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

### • **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 Councillor's 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 Councillors Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to remain apolitical.

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. And 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.

Councillors and employees of Garstang Town Council should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish