

SHILDON TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1 Introduction

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors and staff 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 in their official capacity.

2 Definition of Social Media

Social media is a term for websites 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; PC's, phones and tablets (eg 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
- Lets communication take place in real time or intermittently

Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Pinterest, Snip.it, Linked in and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

3 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 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.
- As identity theft, account takeover and impersonation are common on social media, potentially leading to damage to reputation of the individual or their organisation, Councillors are recommended to ensure that social media accounts are protected by ensuring best practice for password quality is adopted. Where an impersonator account is detected these should be promptly reported to whichever social media platform's administrators.
- Councillors are recommended to avoid, wherever possible, the perpetuation of 'fake' content by applying due diligence, for example checking the sources behind a story and verifying facts before reporting it themselves.

4. Purpose of the Policy

Social media provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience instantaneously 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. In the first instance this will include Facebook and Twitter.

5. Aims and Objectives

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 including but not limited to personal data, commercially sensitive information belonging to the Council etc. In addition Members should not publish or report details of meetings which are not open to members of the public including any confidential reports
- 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 (eg website, quarterly magazine, linking Facebook to Twitter account, etc)

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of general communication. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged into social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

6 Policy Statement

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 Officers and Members.

The 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.

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, not be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected of a representative of Shildon 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 that you are speaking for Shildon Town 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 use a standard disclaimer, such as: “Statements and opinions here are my own and don’t necessarily represent Shildon Town Council’s policies or opinions”.
- 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.
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- Use of the Town Council’s Facebook account must reflect the Council’s position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion

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. Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, propriety or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language. Councillors should abide by the Members Code of Conduct for Shildon Town Council.

7 Responsibilities

The Town Clerk is the designated ‘Council’ owner of the Council Social Media channels agreed by the Council.

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 realising 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.
- 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 characterisations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Shildon Town Council at risk.
- Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies. Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media they wish, but must abide by this policy at all times, when so doing.

8 Asking the Council to follow, like or share messages

The Council may follow, like or share messages, mostly from our partners, other organisations we work with and local media. This allows us to monitor and disseminate important information that we may need to make residents aware of. To enable us to do this we cannot follow or like a large number of other people as we would risk missing key messages. Liking or following someone does not necessarily mean that we support or endorse them or their views.

9 Social Networking – Employees

Social networking sites must only be accessed during breaks. The exception to this is any employee who has permission to post news to the Council's website or Facebook page.

Regardless of when or where you access social networking sites you must not share any Council information which includes names of colleagues including managers or elected members, share or distribute photographic images or videos obtained of colleagues or taken initially for council purposes.

You must not refer to the council, its employees, its services or any of its practices in derogatory terms.

10 Pre-election Period

In the six week run up to a local election – 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.

Notwithstanding this the Council will continue to publish Important Service Announcements using social media during the period.

Adopted by Shildon Town Council on 11th September, 2017