

# WATTON TOWN COUNCIL



## SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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## **1. Introduction**

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors and staff an overview of Social Media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officer and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

## **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:

1. Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
2. Allows messages to flow between many different types of device; PCs, phones and tablets (eg Ipad)
3. Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
4. Speeds and broadens the flow of information
5. Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
6. Allows communication take place in real time or intermittently

Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, You Tube, Pinterest, Snip.It, Linked In, Nextdoor 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:

1. 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.
2. 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 and interpreted as useful information.
3. 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. 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. This already includes Facebook, Twitter and Nextdoor.

#### **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:

1. Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media
2. A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
3. That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
4. That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
5. That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected
6. 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, quarterly magazine, linking Facebook to twitter account, Nextdoor etc)

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure. **Refer to the Council's Communications Policy.**

#### **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.

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.

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.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of WATTON Town Council:

1. Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
2. Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
3. Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
4. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act.
5. 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, such as: "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions".
6. 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.
7. Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
8. Use of the Town Council's Twitter, Facebook or Nextdoor accounts 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.

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, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

## **7. Responsibilities**

The Town Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of the Council Twitter feed and any other Social Media channels agreed by the Council. Councillors officially appointed by the Council or the Deputy Town Clerk may assist the Town Clerk to disseminate information on the Council's Twitter feed during busy times or when the Clerk is on leave to ensure the best use of the Twitter account. However, all must ensure they follow this policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Town Clerk.

The Town Clerk is permitted to operate a Twitter account but must adhere to this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

## **8. Guidance for Councillors - *social media and meetings***

The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of WATTON issues and the use of social media can help with this, especially during official council meetings. Twitter is a quick and direct way of feeding concise updates about a meeting - these principles for members are aimed at the use of Twitter but are equally applicable to other forms of social media.

Below are some extra guidelines for councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

1. 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'.
2. Councillors' tweets/blogs during council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.
3. 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. WATTON residents expect debate and to be informed about council business, not witness petty arguments.
4. Remember that if you break the law using social media (for example by posting something defamatory), you will be personally responsible.

## **9. Facebook Strategy**

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 town council use. They include sites like Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga. 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 town.

Facebook, for example, offers a rich platform allowing you to share unlimited content, including images and videos.

Example activity:

1. Share articles / blog posts / expertise
2. Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
3. Create surveys to encourage participation from visitors
4. Upload images and videos
5. Generic news – what's happening in the area

One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “friend” others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Care should be exercised when accepting invitations to friend others within personal social networking sites. Friends will gain access to the Council’s network of contacts on the site.

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

1. As a Town Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
2. Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
3. 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.
4. Do not disclose confidential matters or criticize council policies or personnel.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. Do not post images that include young people or vulnerable groups without express permission.
8. Pay close attention to the site's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site.
9. Only add statements approved by either Full Council, a committee, the Town Mayor or the Town Clerk.
10. 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.
11. Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at WATTON Town Council at risk.
12. 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.
13. Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
14. 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.
15. 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.
16. The account will not be used for playing games, adding applications, or anything of a personal nature. Contravention of this rule could result in disciplinary procedures.
17. Private messages will be sent in response to anyone sending an initial private message to the Town Council accounts. If a “simple” response does not satisfy the enquiry then the person will be asked to email the Council with the request for comment and the office email will be provided. Any posts by “friends”/” followers” raising issues/questions/comments that cannot be answered “simply” will be dealt with separately via email. The Town Council email address will be provided.

18. If councillors or employees encounter a situation while using social media that threatens to become antagonistic, individuals should disengage from the dialogue in a polite manner and seek the advice of the full council or clerk.

Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

## 10. Twitter Strategy

Twitter is a 'microblogging' platform which allows users to post short messages and converse with other users. Unlike email or text messaging, these conversations take place in the open and engage audiences in discussions about services, products and issues – connecting a vast amount of likeminded people in an often targeted and purposeful way.

Example activity:

1. Share relevant articles / blog posts / expertise
2. Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
3. Link to Facebook content / surveys / pictures / videos
4. Follow and participate in discussions with other related tweeters
5. Comment on tweets and re-tweet other posts to build community
6. Offer relevant Q&A sessions
7. Provide information and news updates on Council activities
8. disseminate information in emergency situations

The WATTON Town Council Twitter account has been set up to inform followers of related news, events, online facilities and other matters that may be of interest to residents of the community, local businesses and visitors to the area.

People following WATTON Town Council can expect tweets covering some or all of the following:

1. Updates on Council activities
2. Announcements about matters of importance to WATTON town residents and those who may be visiting or moving to WATTON
3. Requests for information and assistance
4. News about our online facilities
5. Re-tweets from organisations that we are following which meet our Twitter Policy

Following:

If you follow The Town Council on Twitter it will not automatically follow the person back and the right is reserved to block that person from following the Town Council. Being followed by us does not imply endorsement of any kind.

WATTON Town Council is unable to monitor Twitter round the clock. However, it will endeavour to answer all sensible tweeted questions. Please be aware that due to privacy it may not be possible to answer all tweet questions.

Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts subject to following the guidelines. Key questions when tweeting are:

1. What do the followers really want to know?

2. When do they need to know it?
3. Why is the information you're sharing relevant?
4. Am I the most appropriate person to be responding to queries/commenting on tweets if it is a Council-related matter?

*Keep the content valuable!*

Negative comments should only be responded to with factual information and on-line arguments must always be avoided.

## **11. Nextdoor Strategy**

Nextdoor is a British social network for local communities. It aims to help people make the most of where they live by connecting with their neighbours and sharing practical information, advice and resources.

People sign up with their postcode and email address and they are automatically connected to the Nextdoor users in their local area. They can post messages, events, polls and pictures, and locals can respond. Users are posted on the discussions happening in their local area. Users can customise their account so they control how much information they receive, the areas they're interested in, and what they share about themselves.

Main uses:

Nextdoor is a place for neighbours to discuss any local issue they care about. Today, over 700,000 people in over 4,400 communities across Britain are using the site to:

- discuss nearby news, crime, planning proposals and public services
- find locals with common interests, organise and attend social groups and events
- share belongings and skills with neighbours, from hedge-trimmers to computing tips
- recommend and discover local businesses and tradespeople
- promote, campaign and volunteer for community projects and local causes

Target audiences:

- Local residents
- Local groups
- Local authorities – enables open dialogue between local residents and elected officials, from local councils and police to parish councillors and MPs. Users care about their local area, and want to be kept informed about council activities, public services and crime. Nextdoor enables local authorities to reach users within their administrative boundaries instantly, at no cost, and without the burden of managing a platform or moderating content.
- Local businesses



The WATTON Town Council Nextdoor account will be set up to inform users of related news, events, online facilities and other matters that may be of interest to residents of the community and local businesses in a similar way to Twitter and Facebook. Please see the above sections (particularly 9 & 10) regarding monitoring of Nextdoor and guidelines for councillors setting up their own accounts.

**11. Other Social Media**

At this stage it is not intended to use any other forms of social media for official use by WATTON Town Council. However, this could be open to review in the future.

Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media they wish to but must abide by this policy at all times when so doing.

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 At a Meeting of WATTON Town Council ....., the  
 aforementioned procedures were approved.

Clerk of the Council.....

Date.....

Date of next review.....

I hereby confirm that I have received this policy which forms part of the terms of my employment:

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Date received</b>	
<b>Employee's Signature</b>	
<b>Line Manager's signature</b>	