Social Media Policy

1.1 Aim of the policy:

This policy is intended to help councillors and council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as emails, blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as 'X' formally known as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other relevant social media websites.

Social media maybe used to:
- Advertise events and activities
- Good news stories linked websites or press page
- Vacancies
- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- 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 resident queries to the Clerk and all other Councillors

The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication The Parish Council newsletter will remain as part of communicating information about the Parish Council. Other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication. Therefore, existing means of communication should continue with social media being an additional option.

Facebook will be used to support the information on the website.
Emails will be used to distribute information of council business.

Councillors are advised to have a separate council and personal email addresses, individual Parish Councillors are responsible for what they post on social media and are responsible for any online activity conducted via their published email address which is used for council business.

1.2. This policy outlines the standards the council requires councillors and staff to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which the council will monitor the use of social media and the action to be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

1.3. This policy sits alongside other relevant policies which need to be taken into consideration.
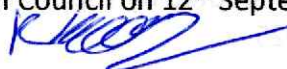
1.4. This policy does not form part of any contract of employment, and it may be amended at any time.

2. Who is covered by this policy

2.1. This policy covers all individuals working at all levels with the council, including all elected and co-opted councillors, the clerk to the council and all other employees and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, and aspects of the Members Code of Conduct apply to the online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. What you write on the web is permanent.

3. The scope of this policy

3.1. The council has a corporate presence on the web and by use of email, which it uses to communicate with people who live in, work in and visit the parish. The council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. We may ask those who contact us for their preferred channel of communication when we deal with them. Over time the Parish Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Social Media Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

3.2 All members and staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the council, its services, employees, partners and community.

Breach of the policy by volunteers will result in the council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

Behaviour required by the Members' Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Members will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply. Remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published in a way that cannot be contained. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative and accurate. Members must be aware that their profile as a councillor means the more likely it is they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when blogging or networking.

It must be remembered that communications on the internet are permanent and public. When communicating in a 'private' group it should be ensured that the council would be content with the statement should it be made public.

4. Rules for using social media.

4.1 Staff and councillors must not allow their interaction on any websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others. They must not make any derogatory, discriminatory, defamatory or offensive comments about other staff, councillors, the council or about the people, businesses and agencies the council works with and serves.

4.2 Posts must not contain anyone's personal information, other than necessary basic contact details

4.3 If staff or councillors blog or tweet personally, and not in their role as a councillor, they must not act, claim to act, or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the council. They should not include web links to official council websites as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the council.

4.4 All staff and councillors must ensure they use council facilities appropriately. If using a council-provided website, blog site or social networking area, any posts made will be viewed as made in an official capacity. Do not use council facilities for personal or political blogs.

4.5 The Council will appoint a nominated person as moderator. They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content on council pages, ensuring it complies with the Social Media Policy. The moderator will have authority to immediately, without notice or comment, remove any posts from the council's social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. Such post will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and the clerk for council records.

4.6 The Council will appoint a nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Parish Council Website. The website may be used to:
- Post notices and minutes of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Post good news stories
- Link to appropriate websites or press page if those sites meet the council's expectations of conduct
- Advertise vacancies
- Retweet or 'share' information from partners i. e. Police, Library, district council, etc.
- Announce new information appropriate to the council.
- Post or Share information promoting bodies for community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups
- Post other items as the council see fit.

4.7 Staff and individual parish councillors are responsible for what they post. They are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address, which is used for council business.

4.8 All social media sites in use should be updated and checked on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place.

4.9 When participating in online communication staff and councillors must;
   a. Be respectful and responsible; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
   b. Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council. Never make misleading or false statements.
   c. Parish Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All Parish Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council or bring the Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Council's Code.
   d. Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, not write in red to emphasis points,
   e. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
   f. Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
   g. Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
   h. Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
   i. Spell and grammar check everything.
   j. Correct any errors promptly

4.10 Residents and councillors should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.
   a) There will not be immediate response to communications as they may be discussed by the Parish Council and all responses will be agreed by the Parish Council.

This Social Media Policy was adopted by Toppesfield Parish Council on 12ᵗʰ September 2024
Review Date: September 2025   Signed: _[signature]_

b) The Parish Clerk and the moderators will be responsible for all final published responses.

c) If a matter needs further consideration it may be raised at either the open meeting 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.

d) If the moderator feels unable to answer a post for example of a contentious nature this shall be referred to the Parish clerk. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Parish Clerk directly.

e) Some communication from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Parish 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.

4.11 If a matter raised in any form of social media needs further consideration by the council 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 and invited to contact the clerk direct. Any response agreed by the council will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.

4.12 Reports of any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should be reported to the Clerk for referral to the moderator(s) and/or council as required.

5. The Policy will be reviewed annually

Additional background information (IDeA) 2010

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 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.

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The Members' 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't and can 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 Members' Code of Conduct. Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information.

Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their council, local police service or councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you. Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way.

Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake; perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

Avoid the trolls.