



WINSFORD TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

This policy seeks to provide councillors, volunteers, and staff with an overview of social media and outlines the Council's position on various aspects of its use.

The policy also includes guidelines on officer, volunteer, and councillor responsibilities when using electronic channels of communication.

'Social media' is a term for web content based on user participation and user-generated content.

It includes social networking sites and other sites centred on user interaction.

In addition to the above scope of social media, this policy also covers use of the Town Council's email system by the above groups.

Social media includes the following: -

- Covers a variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, and audio;
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of device;
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment, or just view information;
- Speeds up and broadens the flow of information;
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications; and
- Allows communication to take place in real time or intermittently.

Examples of social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, and Linked In.

Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

As said, although not generally thought of as 'social media' per se, this policy also includes the use of email. Email displays many of the characteristics outlined above, namely allowing messages to flow; speeding up the flow of information; and providing different kinds of communication.

The Town Council acts as the moderators of the Town Council's social media output and is responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy.

The moderators will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from the official Town Council social media pages which are deemed to be of a threatening, defamatory or libellous nature.

Where appropriate, the moderators will have the authority to report any such posting to any other appropriate agency including Cheshire Police and Cheshire West and Chester's Council's Safeguarding Unit.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on a WTC official social media page that denigrates Town Councillors, Council staff or residents should report them to the Town Clerk.

ISSUES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite the perceived advantages of social media, there are issues with its use, including the following (again, a number of these issues apply to the use of email): -

- Information can be shared in the public domain and can theoretically be viewed by anyone in the world. In many cases, it is not even necessary to register to view the content. Registering is only required should you wish to participate;
- Groups on specific themes can easily set up and posts can then be edited by the owners of that group to reflect their interests, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard;
- There is no guarantee of truth, and it is more likely that ill-informed comment and gossip will be included rather than useful (and verifiable) information;
- The nature of social media is that information is shared immediately and it is easy to respond instantaneously which can result in unintentionally inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread beyond the intended audience; and
- It is very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh any value gained in the first place.

The Town Council recognises that not all these issues apply to the use of social media, but all can be observed in any cursory examination of social media in general.

The use of email is different in some ways – the sender is identified; needs to be registered to use the email; and can have their emails monitored for misuse. It is true, however, that emails can also be seen by anyone if forwarded; they can end up being seen by people who were not intended to receive them and can cause issues for organisations like WTC as a result.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Given the issues outlined above, WTC needs to have measures in place to mitigate the risks set out in the previous section. These are listed below.

The Town Council will use social media platforms, but no-one other than the Clerk or his/her authorised representative(s) is/are authorised to post material on social media in the Council's name or on its behalf.

The Town Council will use its own website to provide commentary (in accordance with the law and regulations) and provide information. The Council will not use its website to link directly to the social media of any organisation/individual except its own.

Individual Councillors, volunteers, and staff may have personal accounts on social media and may use these for their own purposes, so long as they do not refer to Council business at all then there should be no problem. It is when a personal account, or previously personal account, is used to discuss an issue of relevance to the Council or a Council issue that problems may arise.

Individual Councillors, volunteers, and staff are very strongly advised to refrain from using personal accounts to refer to Town Council issues. To do so may render all the activity on that account liable to judgement in accordance with the Members Code of Conduct and the law as it applies to the Council.

Individual Councillors, volunteers, and staff 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.

In relation to email, each Councillor and officer has their own email account, which is in the style 'firstinitialsurname@winsford.gov.uk'. These email accounts should not be used for personal use, only for work business if possible. WTC email users should adhere to laws and to relevant policies in their use of email. Email should be used responsibly, and all users should be particularly careful not to copy third parties into sensitive and/or confidential emails, including those relating to Part B items on Council meeting agendas.

In the use of both social media and email, Councillors, officers, and volunteers should pay heed to the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) relating to personal data. Please refer to the WTC Data Protection and Retention Policy found on the WTC website at <https://winsford.gov.uk/policies/>.

GUIDELINES

Considering the points set out in this Policy, the following guidelines apply to all groups involved with the Town Council and relating to use of social media (including email). These apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Winsford Town Council.

Staff, Volunteers, and Councillors

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in this Social Media Policy, and the Council's Member Code of Conduct;
- 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 addresses and/or telephone numbers;
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with relevant Data Protection legislation;
- 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, and do not post or comment on items of relevance to the Council;
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong;
- Staff and volunteers must not use social media accounts or their personal email accounts in relation to the Council's business.

Councillors

- Councillors must be aware that any use of social media in which reference is made to the role as a Councillor, or to Council business (however tenuous) may be deemed to make the whole account and every comment in it a "Council" account and therefore the standards of the Members' Code of Conduct will be applied;
- Councillors are at liberty to set up accounts 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 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;

- 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;
- Where Councillors choose to use personal accounts for the Council's business they must make it clear that what they say is representative of their personal views only. Where possible a standard disclaimer should be used such as: "*Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions*".

CONCLUSIONS

This Policy has set out the advantages, issues, uses and guidelines relating to the use of social media by and in the name of Winsford Town Council. The Policy has also covered use of the WTC email system.

NOVEMBER 2020