

Hebden Royd Town Council - SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE

Introduction

The aim of this policy is to set out principles to provide guidance to town Councillors, council officers and others who engage with the Council using online communications, collectively referred to as social media.

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet via use of applications; software and hardware including smart-phones, tablets laptops and so on.

This policy covers all forms of media which include (but are not limited to):

- Town Council Website
- Facebook. Instagram and other social networking sites
- X (formally Twitter) and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video and podcast sites
- Blogs and discussion forums
- E-Newsletter
- Press Releases
- TV and Radio Interviews

The use of social media does not replace other existing forms of communication.

Principles Guiding The Use of Social Media

The principles of this policy apply to town Councillors, council officers (in conjunction with the policies outlined in the staff handbook) and applies to others communicating with the Town Council.

Social Media shall be used:

- a) To publish, promote and preserve the work of Hebden Royd Town Council to a wider audience.
- b) To advertise and promote engagement in the democratic process and to widen participation across the community in the affairs of the Town Council and the community it serves and represents.
- c) To advertise and promote the work of its partner agencies such as the Police, Fire and Ambulance services, Calderdale MBC and other town/parish councils. As well as community groups active in the area.
- d) To disseminate community news and information of public interest such as road closures, planning applications, events and so on.
- e) To encourage economic development by promoting events, activities, initiatives that will attract visitors to our area and to encourage residents to participate in activities.

Social Media shall NOT be used for:

- f) To enter into online debates or arguments about the Town Council or its partners activities;
- g) Canvass, promote or advertise any political ideological policy or decision of a councillor or political party.

Approved Social Media Platforms

- a) Town Council website
- b) Facebook page and specific official event facebook pages i.e. Happy Hounds & Pumpkin Trail
- c) X Account – usage under review at this time.
- d) Instagram account

The Communications Officer is the nominated social media officer with the delegated authority to issue official postings via the approved social media accounts. From time to time the Town Clerk or the Deputy Clerk will issue statements on social media on behalf of the Council.

All statements must follow known policy otherwise it must be reviewed and approved by the Town Clerk before being posted to a social media account. If in the opinion of the Town Clerk, the post is unsuitable for dissemination it must NOT be posted. The Town Clerk reserve the right to make decisions and shall have the final say in deciding the suitability of public postings to approved social media accounts.

Media Relations

The Council issues press releases to the local, regional and national press. Press releases shall be used to publish and promote the work of Hebden Royd Town Council.

Press releases will be compiled by the Communications Officer using information from the rest of the Town Council team. All press releases will be signed off by either the Town Clerk or the Deputy Town Clerk before being released to the press.

The Communications Officer will act as the first port of call for all media enquiries.

Any TV or Radio interview enquiries will be reviewed by the Town Clerk or Deputy Town Clerk before being assigned to an Officer or Councillor to conduct.

Social Networking Guidelines

Social Media is currently one of the most popular ways in which the community wish to receive news and updates. However, social media has its pitfalls and can attract negative comments or have an adverse impact upon the individual or the Town Council's reputation. Councillors & Officers must be aware that they act as ambassadors of the Council. Whilst, the Town Council does not control what Councillors or employees post on their personal social media accounts, they need to consider their association with the Town Council and the potential of their personal views/posts being confused with the agreed views of the Town Council. If such a mistake arises, it is the responsibility of the officer to clearly state that the opinions are their own and not those of the Town Council. Councillors must also be mindful of their obligations under the adopted Code of Conduct and law. Employees should not post, share or comment any political statements or any politically affiliated statements.

These guidelines are not definitive and do not provide an exhaustive list of all the considerations to consider before using social media, however they aim to give a framework for pausing and reflecting before posting:

- Stop and think before posting and “sense-check” whether the content is informative, objective and impartial. The post may well be shared around the region, nation or world.

- Irony, sarcasm and comedy are all subjective notions. People may not perceive what you perhaps see as funny or ironic. Be mindful of being misinterpreted, misquoted or quoted out of context. If ever in doubt please refer to the Town Clerk
- Abide by the terms and conditions of the social media platform you are using and observe the community guidelines respectfully.
- Monitor and be prepared to remove posts from social media platforms/pages which do not adhere to this policy or meet a threshold of behaviour which is deemed acceptable.
- Do use privacy settings where necessary.
- Protect passwords and change regularly where necessary. Town Council passwords shall only be in the knowledge of the Town Clerk and those authorised by the Town Clerk to post on their behalf.
- Be especially mindful of posting photographs of children or vulnerable individuals. Seek explicit written consent of any parent/guardian/carers who has responsibility. If in doubt always seek advice first before posting.
- Do not post when your judgment is impaired due to bias, or pre-disposition or pre-determination, or even when tired or otherwise.

Town councillors and council officers must not:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms.
- present personal opinions as that of the Council.
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council.
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Council.
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks.
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so.
- publish photographs or videos of minors or vulnerable individuals without parental/guardian/carer permission.
- post any information that infringes copyright of others.
- post any information that may be deemed libel.
- participate in online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment.
- bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity.
- post any negative content relating to the Council, Officers or other Councillors.
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief or other relevant protected characteristics as outlined by the Equality Act 2010.
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence.

Members have been provided with a separate email address to be only used only for Council business and correspondence. The nominated account will be subject to any request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and/or the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

This policy sits alongside other relevant existing policies that need to be taken into consideration.

The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way that it does to other written or verbal communication.

In the main, Councillors and council officers have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

Code of Practice

When using social media (including email) town Councillors and council officers must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Publishing untrue statements about a person which are damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action and fine for damages.

This also applies if someone else publishes something libellous on your social media site. A successful libel claim will result in an award of damages against you.

Posting copyright images or text on social media sites without permission is an offence.

Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.

Publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation is an offence.

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate town councillors, council officers or residents should report them to the Town Clerk.

The moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from Council social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory or libellous nature. Where appropriate the moderator will have the authority to report any such posting to any other appropriate agency including the Police.

The Acceptable use of Social Media

We recognise that social media has an important role to play in how we communicate with, engage and promote dialogue with our residents. For some people, sites like Twitter, Facebook & Instagram are their preferred method of interacting with the Council. We are pleased to be able to offer this method for people to get in touch, to ask us questions, reporting issues and to seek our help or support. We acknowledge that everyone has a right to free speech. This is enshrined in law. But a right to free speech must be balanced with UK laws covering matters such as libel and defamation, contempt of court, harassment, the Communications Act, Computer Misuse Act and what is generally acceptable. As a Council, we also have a duty of care towards our employees and Councillors.

What is and is not acceptable

We know that there will be times when people will be unhappy with what the Council does (or doesn't do) or the decisions it takes. Criticism is a fact of life and we know organisations like ours are in the public spotlight. This includes targeting named members of staff with direct, unacceptable, criticism. We will reserve the right to take action in relation to social media posts or messages which:

- Are abusive
- Exhibit examples of bullying or harassment
- Are threatening

- Are discriminatory
- Use sexist, racist or other unacceptable language
- Are defamatory or libellous
- May be in contempt of court
- Break any other law (such as hate crime)
- Contain inappropriate material (photographs, video or links to)
- Incite someone/people to break the law.

How we will deal with unacceptable behaviour

In the first instance, individuals will be issued with a written warning in private via a direct message, or email if appropriate and any inappropriate material removed immediately from the Council's social media feeds. All efforts will be made to identify the person responsible, but if this is not possible, in the case unacceptable the content continues to be published, we will remove posts, messages or content considered to be unacceptable, from the Council's social media feeds. If unacceptable behaviour continues the Council will consider blocking users from interacting with the Council's social media. A decision to block a user will be made by the Town Clerk. If a block is imposed, the Town Clerk will write to the person concerned, explaining the reasons and setting out the terms of when the council will review the block. The Town Clerk will use their discretion and the decision whether to continue blocking a user will be reviewed on a regular basis.

Unacceptable behaviour may also be addressed by restricting the way someone can communicate with the Council, or their participation/attendance at meetings. We may also report the matter to the police where behaviour amounts to abuse or harassment or a criminal offence is suspected. The Council reserves the right to take whatever legal action may be necessary in the case of libellous or defamatory posts/messages.

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