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Aims of the Policy

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Councillors, Council staff 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.

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1. Introduction

Social media is a term for websites based on user participation and user-generated content, including social media sites and other sites that are centred on user interaction.

This policy is intended to help councillors and council staff make appropriate decisions about the use of social media, and to outline Neston Town Council's (NTC's) position on various aspects of its use, including the management of comments made by members of the public when using NTC's social media sites.

It includes standards and guidelines for councillors and Council staff to observe when using social media as a channel for communication, the management of public comments, and the action to be taken in respect to breaches of this policy.

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

- Neston Town Council (NTC) website
- Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites the Council may wish to use in the future including Threads and Bluesky
- Twitter and other micro-blogging sites
- YouTube and other video clips and podcast sites
- WhatsApp
- Blogs and discussion forums

- Email

This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by Neston Town Council. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

Over time, NTC may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services the Council delivers. When these changes occur, this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This policy may be amended at any time.

2. How Social Media will be used by the Council

Social media may be used for:

- Engagement with individuals and communities for the promotion of council-based services, decisions and actions.
- Supporting local democracy.
- Distribute in whole or part information from council notices, agendas, approved minutes and dates of meetings.
- Information specifically agreed to be communicated via social media at council meetings.
- Advertising events and activities that NTC has organised, worked in partnership with, or co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community.
- Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area.
- Announcing new information relevant to people living in or around the Neston area.
- Providing and exchanging information about local services and local events.
- Support community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience.
- Gathering local residents' insights.
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the local area.
- Advertising vacancies – councillor or staff.
- Re-tweet or share relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities, Police, Library, Health etc.
- Post, retweet, or share relevant information from local community groups for community benefit such as information from community associations, community groups, schools, sports clubs, Scouts/Guides and charities.
- Link to appropriate websites and other social media accounts of sites or organisations that meet the council's expectations of conduct.
- Post other items as the council see fit and appropriate.
- Refer resident queries via social media to the Chief Officer for wider dissemination to councillors, if required.

Councillors and staff should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

NTC will run its social media pages so that it can pass information on to residents quickly. Social media accounts will not necessarily be checked daily and posts will not

necessarily be responded to. NTC's social media accounts are primarily a tool to pass information on.

Though NTC is keen to hear residents' views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments, particularly on planning applications. In order to manage the messages received, residents will be asked – if necessary – to forward their comments to NTC. This can be done by emailing the Chief Officer: council@nestontowncouncil.gov.uk by contacting the Mayor/Chair or by attending at a Council/committee meeting.

3. Who is covered by this policy?

The principles of this policy apply to elected and co-opted councillors, council staff and volunteers (collectively referred to as staff in this policy).

All councillors 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.

Individual councillors and Council staff are responsible for what they post, both in a Council and personal capacity.

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

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect serious breaches of this policy by employees.

This may include unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive comments by an employee.

Volunteers in breach of the policy will result in the Council no longer using their services and, if necessary, appropriate action will be taken.

The behaviour required in the 'Councillors Code of Conduct' shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply.

Councillors 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.

Councillors and staff must remember that communications on the internet are permanent and public.

When communicating in a 'private' group Councillors and staff should consider if the Council would be content with the statement and what effect this may have.

A councillor or council staff member's behaviour on any social media site must be consistent with the behaviour required generally.

4. Code of Practice

When using social media, councillors and staff 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.

Councillors and staff should not post comments that they would not be prepared to make in writing or face-to-face.

When participating in online communication, councillors and staff must:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative and balanced;
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents;
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud' i.e., use sentence case format and not write in capital letters or red to emphasise points;
- Seek permission to publish original photos or videos (in addition, posting copyright images or text on social media sites is an offence so councillors and staff must ensure any information does not infringe copyright);
- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Council, and never hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms;
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate;
- Spell and grammar check everything.

Councillors and staff must not:

- Give out the personal data of others on social media, including home address and telephone numbers;
- Use an individual's name in social media communications or post information about an individual unless given written permission to do so (publishing personal data of individuals without permission is a breach of Data Protection legislation);
- Present personal opinions as that of Neston Town Council. If a councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets or communicates online personally, and not in the role as a councillor or member of staff, they must not claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of the Council i.e., they should not include web links to official Council websites, Council logos, Council email addresses or any other Council identification as this may give or reinforce the impression that they are representing the Council;
- Present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; they must protect the good reputation of the Council;
- Make false or misleading statements;
- Post personal or political content, content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the council or post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks;
- Make derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory or offensive comments about any person including council staff, councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies the Council works with and serves, or post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment. Language that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site;
- Engage in personal attacks, online fights, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others;
- Publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission;
- Post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action);
- Post obscene material (publication of some obscene material is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence);

- Conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence and must not bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity. Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the council at a council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at council meetings. Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate the Town Councillors, council staff or residents should report them to the Council Manager for referral to the Data Protection Officer (DPO) and/or the Council as required.

5. Managing Social Media Accounts

Currently the Council has a Town Council website, X (formally) Twitter, Facebook and Instagram account.

The Council's Senior Management Team will be responsible for posting content on council website, Facebook, Instagram and X (formally) Twitter) pages.

The Chief Officer, Market & Town Hall Manager and the Community Engagement Officer Manager will be able to post on the Council's Facebook page. Councillors may comment on posts to provide further information and share posts using their own profiles.

The Council will appoint moderators to monitor the Council's social media output and be responsible for monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy. These shall be the two nominated councillors, the Chief Officer the Market & Town Hall and the Community Engagement Officer.

The two nominated councillors will also, in addition to the Chief Officer, have authority, without notice or comment, to remove any posts from Council social media pages which are deemed to be of an inflammatory, defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts may also be reported to the hosts (i.e., Facebook) and also to the Chief Officer for Council records.

The Chief Officer or any person acting as a moderators will also have the authority to block or ban access from an individual or company's account to NTC's social media pages. The Chief Officer must be informed that this has been done.

When participating in online communication, NTC will generally allow posts on its social media pages from members of the public that:

- Are responsible and respectful;
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents, and
- Are objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Posts may be deleted and the holder of an account banned as appropriate.

It is ultimately up to the moderators – either acting individually or in consultation - as to whether a post will be deleted and/or an account blocked.

The Chief Officer, in liaison with the Council's IT contractor, will also be responsible for checking the correct security settings are in place on the social media sites used.

Nominated councillors may assist the Chief Officer to disseminate information however they all must ensure that they follow this policy.

No social media account details may be changed without the permission of the Chief Officer or Full Council.

6. Further reading

Further information and a guide for councillors can be found by clicking onto the following link: <https://local.gov.uk/councillors-and-social-media>

This policy will be reviewed periodically, if and when data protection rules change or the Council wish to review the way they present and publish its social media.