

Proposal for the Adoption and Ratification of a Social Media Policy for Sithney Parish Council

Presented to Sithney Parish Council on 3rd September 2019 by Councillor Brian Rogers

Sithney Parish Council

1 POLICY STATEMENT

1.1 The use of digital and social media now has a clear and compelling impact on all areas of local government, enabling better and more direct contact between Sithney Parish Council and the people and organizations that it serves and works with.

1.2 This Social Media Policy aims to describe how Sithney Parish Council will use social media to improve and expand the ways in which it communicates with its' parishoners, local businesses and the various government (local and central) agencies that it deals with. It sets out what is and is not acceptable usage of social media and complements the general rules in the Code of Conduct for Councillors.

2 SCOPE

2.1 Social media describes a range of websites and online tools which allow people to interact. This includes blogs and postings on a wide range of platforms including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, Instagram and Snapchat.

2.2 Social media is all about sharing information and people use social media platforms to give opinions, create interest groups and to build online communities and network which encourage participation and engagement.

2.3 This policy relates to any social media communication published by or on behalf of the council or any individual in their capacity as a councillor.

3 KEY PRINCIPLES

3.1 Any communication is capable of being misinterpreted. The immediacy of social media and the lack of face to face contact can magnify any problem

3.2 Information and comments made can be broadcast to more people more quickly than other media.

3.3 The same rules apply to social media that govern other behaviour as a councillor, but extra care needs to be taken given the immediacy and ease of dissemination.

3.4 Although social media is conversational in tone it is recorded and it is permanent. Content and comment must, consequently, be accurate, informative and considered.

4 RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACCOUNTABILITIES

4.1 The Council will appoint a nominated person as moderator of parish council social media output and be responsible for posting and monitoring content to ensure it complies with the Social Media Policy. This may be, but not necessarily so, the Parish Clerk.

4.2 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 nature that includes:

- Obscene content
- Content that could be considered 'hate' and/or equality related, such as homophobic, racist and sexist
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous and/or defamatory statements
- Plagiarized material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam

5 PROCEDURE

5.1 Parish Councillors and Council Staff 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 without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libel
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment
- bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence

5.2 It is not a requirement for councillors to have a personal Facebook or Twitter account or to use other forms of social media to engage with parishioners or otherwise fulfil their role, but this will often be the case.

5.3 Councillors should always spell out clearly whether they are communicating on social media in their capacity as a councillor or as a private individual.

5.4 Councillors should ensure that they comply with the Code of Conduct for Councillors whenever they act or appear to act in an official capacity on social media in the same way as with any other form of communication.

5.5 Whilst independent communications with parishioners are important in order to engage and be approachable, the overarching rules are that councillors should not make commitments on behalf of the Council, not bring the Council into disrepute and always respect confidentiality.

6 SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

6.1 It is our intention that the Sithney Parish Council Facebook pages will provide timely information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and a vehicle for constructive comments & suggestions from residents and local organisations.

6.2 In order to ensure that all discussions on the Sithney Parish Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's mission and goals, contributors must follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including Parish Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Sithney Parish Council Facebook page for commercial purposes or to market products.
- Comply with equality laws and tenets. Do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.
- Never bully or harass anyone. Do not say anything that might be construed as bullying or intimidation.
- Do not bring the council into disrepute. Do not publish anything that could reasonably be perceived as reflecting badly upon or lowering the reputation of you or the Council.
- Do not disclose confidential information. Do not disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone, or information acquired by you which you believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature.
- Consider keeping your personal and councillor profile on social networking site separate.
- Check you have the appropriate privacy settings for any private blog or networking site
- Be aware that you will be seen as acting in your official capacity if you publish information that you could only have accessed by being a councillor.

7 POTENTIAL LEGAL ISSUES

Libel – If an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation is published, they may consider it as defamatory and consider legal action.

Copyright – Using images or text on social media from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos), without obtaining permission, is likely to breach copyright laws.

Data Protection – Personal data of individuals must not be published unless you have their express permission. Personal information in an email or personal exchange should not be presumed to imply any consent to pass it on to others.

Bias and Predetermination – Councillors should not say anything on social media (or indeed anywhere) that suggests they have made up their mind on an issue that is due to be formally decided. While your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you

need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence, and were genuinely persuadable to a different view, or the decision may be later challenged as invalid.

8 OFFICAL COMMUNICATIONS

8.1 Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and the Council is not obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through the Facebook channel.

9 RELATED POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

9.1 These include, but are not limited to:

Councillor Code of Conduct

Communications Policy

Data Protection

Author: Councillor Brian Rogers, presented to Sithney Parish Council 3rd September 2019

