



SEDGEBROOK PARISH COUNCIL – Social Media Policy – 23 July 2021 (reviewed 7 July 2022, 13 July 2023 and 18 July 2024)

1. Introduction

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors and staff an overview of Social Media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Officer and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

2. Definition of Social Media

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

Social media has the following characteristics:

- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of devices: PCs, phones and tablets (e.g. iPad)
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
- Allows communication take place in real time or intermittently

Examples of popular social media tools include: X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Wikipedia, You Tube, Pinterest, Snap Chat, Linked-In and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

3. Pitfalls

Whilst these tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are some pitfalls to be aware of:

- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. You do not even need to register in many cases to view the content. Registering is only required should you wish to participate and post to the site.
- Groups on specific themes can set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately, and it is

very easy to respond instantaneously resulting in unintentionally inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience.

Friends of Friends may not be our Friends.

It is also very easy to spend excess time viewing and responding to messages that outweigh any value in the first place.

4. Purpose of the Policy

Social media provides the Parish Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience instantaneously on a range of subjects relating to its activities, providing updates, news, information and retweeting relevant information from other sources. It also provides an opportunity to communicate with younger age groups, the business community and hopefully the harder to reach groups.

The Parish Council will make use of approved social media tools to quickly disseminate information but carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks as stated above. In the first instance this will include Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

5. Aims and Objectives

Social media can be used by the Parish Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this Policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Parish Council- based services through the use of social media
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media
- That all Parish Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
- That the Parish Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected
- That communication by use of social media is effective, timely, appropriate and useful ensuring the Parish Council engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (e.g. Website, Allington News, Sedgebrook Village Email, linking Facebook to X (formerly Twitter) account etc.)

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure. *Please refer to the Parish Council's Communications Policy for further information.*

Policy Statement

It is acknowledged that there is considerable potential for using social media which can provide significant advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to Officers and Members.

This policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Parish Council information or computer systems/networks.

All users (including Elected Member) 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 Parish Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Parish Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Sedgebrook Parish Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
- 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 address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the **Data Protection Act**.
- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you **must not imply** you are speaking **for or on behalf of** the Parish Council.
- Do not** use the Parish Council **e-mail address, logos** or **any other** Parish Council identification.
- Make it clear** that what you say is **representative of your personal views** only.
- Where possible, you should include the Parish Council's adopted disclaimer: **"Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent Sedgebrook Council's policies or opinions"**.
- Know your obligations**; You must comply with other Parish Council policies when using social media (e.g. do not breach Parish Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies).
- Show **respect to all**.
- Be **respectful of the Authority** (the Parish Council) elected Members, contractors and employees.
- Derogatory comments are **always wrong**.
- Use of the Parish Council's X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook accounts (by staff members) **must always accurately reflect** the Council's position / decisions on any matter and in **no circumstances** must it be used to **express personal opinion**.
- If unsure, say nothing** and **seek clarification** from the Parish Clerk.

Elected Members (Councillors) are at liberty to set up accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Parish Council's view. Councillors should at all times 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.

7. Responsibilities

The Parish Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of the Council Social Media channels agreed by the Council.

Councillors may be officially appointed from time to time by the Council to assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information on Social Media channels during busy times or

when the Clerk is absent to ensure the best use of the Social Media accounts. However, all must ensure they follow this policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk.

The Parish Clerk is permitted to operate a X (formerly Twitter) account but must adhere to this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts, but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

8. Guidance for Councillors - social media and meetings

The Parish Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of issues within the parish covered by Sedgebrook Parish Council and the use of social media can help with this, especially during official Council meetings.

Twitter is a quick and direct way of feeding concise updates about a meeting - these principles for members are aimed at the use of X (formerly Twitter) but are equally applicable to other forms of social media.

Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

Handheld devices and laptops are permitted (indeed encouraged) for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings and must not interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Please ensure the volume on all electronic devices is turned to 'mute'.

Councillor's tweets / blogs during Council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting; Tweeting / blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.

Councillors have a responsibility to take council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. Parish residents expect debate and to be informed about council business, not witness petty arguments.

Remember that if you break the law using social media (for example by posting something defamatory), you will be personally responsible.

9. Facebook Strategy

Social networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society. The most popular social networks are web-based, commercial, and not purposely designed for Parish Council use and include sites like Facebook, MySpace and Bebo.

For individuals, social networking sites provide tremendous opportunities for staying in touch with friends and family. Such web sites provide a modern alternative means to communicate with residents of the village for the Parish Council.

Facebook offers a rich platform allowing you to share unlimited content, including images and videos.

Example activity:

Share articles / blog posts / expertise

- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Create surveys to encourage participation from visitors
- Upload images and videos
- Generic news – what’s happening in the area

One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “friend” others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Care should be exercised when accepting invitations to friend others within personal social networking sites. Friends will gain access to the Parish Council’s network of contacts on the site.

Good practice guidelines for the use of Facebook by the Parish Council as a body or Councillors as individuals are:

- As a Parish Council, elected Members and staff have a corporate professional image to uphold and how we individually conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your personal web site or blog and then realising that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Parish Council policies or personnel.
- Select and establish your profile’s security and privacy settings carefully. At a minimum, all privacy settings should be set to “only friends”. “Friends of friends” and “Networks and Friends” open the content to a large group of unknown people.
- All activity on any Parish Council Facebook page must follow the Parish Council’s agreed statement of purpose and outcomes for the use of the networking tool.
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission.
- Pay close attention to the site's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site.
- Only add statements approved by either Full Council, the Chairman or the Parish Clerk.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous at any time (even in a humorous or anecdotal manner).
- Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Evaluate whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Sedgebrook Parish Council at risk
- To reduce security risks, do not install any external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page.
- If you find information on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law.
- Ensure you keep yourself informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

10. Twitter Strategy

X (formerly Twitter) is a 'microblogging' platform which allows users to post short messages and converse with other users. Unlike email or text messaging, these conversations take place in the open and engage audiences in discussions about services, products and issues— connecting a vast amount of likeminded people in an often targeted and purposeful way.

Example activity:

- Share relevant articles / blog posts / expertise
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction
- Link to Facebook content / surveys / pictures / videos
- Follow and participate in discussions with other related tweeters
- Comment on tweets and re-tweet other posts to build community
- Offer relevant Q&A sessions
- Provide information and news updates on Council activities
- Disseminate information in emergency situations

Sedgebrook Council's account would be set up to inform followers of related news, events, online facilities and other matters that may be of interest to residents of the community, local businesses and visitors to the area.

People following Sedgebrook Parish Council can expect tweets covering some or all of the following:

- Updates on Council activities
- Announcements about matters of importance to Sedgebrook Parish residents and those who may be visiting or moving to the village
- Requests for information and assistance
- News about our online facilities
- Re-tweets from organisations that we are following which meet our X (formerly Twitter) Policy*

Following X (formerly Twitter):

If The Parish Council set up an account on X (formerly Twitter) it will not automatically follow the person back and the right is reserved to block that person from following the Parish Council. Being followed by us does not imply endorsement of any kind.

Sedgebrook Parish Council is unable to monitor X (formerly Twitter) 24/7, however it will endeavour to answer all sensible tweeted questions. Please be aware that due to privacy it may not be possible to answer all tweet questions.

Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts subject to following the guidelines.

Key questions when tweeting are:

- What do the followers really want to know?
- When do they need to know it?
- Why is the information you're sharing relevant?
- Am I the most appropriate person to be responding to queries/commenting on tweets if it is a Council-related matter?

Keep the content valuable!

Negative comments should only be responded to with factual information and on-line arguments must always be avoided. In all cases of negative tweets, please remember it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to respond (or otherwise)

11. Other Social Media

At this stage it is not intended to use any forms of social media for official use by Sedgebrook Parish Council.

Councillors are entitled to use any form of social media they wish to but must abide by this policy at all times when so doing.

The Social Media Policy was agreed by Sedgebrook Parish Council on 23 July 2021. This was reviewed and agreed on 7 July 2022, 13 July 2023 and on 18 July 2024.