

# **HAWKWELL PARISH COUNCIL SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

This policy was adopted by the Council at its Meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2025

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Parish Councillors, Council staff and others who engage with the council using online communications. This policy applies to the use of online communications, collectively referred to as Social Media.
- 1.2 Social Media is the term commonly given to websites and online tools allowing users to interact with each other in some way by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This interaction can be through computers and numerous mobile devices.
- 1.3 The use of Social Media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Parish Council has a 'corporate' presence on the web and the use of e-mail to distribute information on Council business. Other forms of Social Media such as a Council Facebook page will be used to enhance the existing means of communication.
- 1.4 The Parish Council Newsletter will remain the main media for the purpose of communicating information about the Parish Council.
- 1.5 The only approved Social Media platform used by Hawkwell Parish Council will be a Council Facebook Page.
- 1.6 The principles of the Policy apply to all Parish Councillors and staff. It is also intended as guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. This Policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.
- 1.7 Adherence to the principles of the Policy will help protect the Council and Councillors with particular regard to issues such as standards, libel, copyright, data protection, bias and pre-determination as well as encouraging good manners online.
- 1.8 Breaches of this Policy by Councillors will be managed through the Code of Conduct, and breaches by staff will be managed through the Disciplinary Procedure. In the main, Councillors and staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences and bring the Parish Council into disrepute.

## **2. Council's Purpose in the use of Social Media**

- 2.1 To publish information about the work of the Parish Council to a wider audience without entering online debates on the work of the Parish Council.
- 2.2 For the purposes of this Policy the methods of communication used by the Parish Council to engage with Parishioners will be the Council Website, e-mails and a Council Facebook Page.

### 2.3 Council's Facebook page may be used to:

- Post agendas and dates/notices of meetings
- Advertise events and activities
- Inform of good news stories
- Advertise vacancies (staff and Councillors)
- Share information from partners i.e. Police, Library, other Local Authorities.
- Announce new information
- Post or share information from other parish related community groups such as schools, sports clubs and charities
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and Councillors.

2.3 In addition, Facebook will be used to provide other information specifically agreed by the Council or its Committees.

2.4 The Council will appoint the Clerk and Deputy Clerk as Moderators. The Moderators will be responsible for posting and monitoring content, ensuring that it complies with the Social Media Policy.

2.5 Councillors and parish staff will not engage in commenting on Facebook posts; Facebook will only be used as a notification method, not as form of two-way communication.

2.6 Councillors are permitted to only react and/or share posts but are not to issue public statements or personal opinions on the Parish Council's behalf.

2.7 Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on our Social Media sites should report to the Clerk to the Council. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

2.8 The Moderators will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from Council's Social Media pages which may contain personal or inflammatory remarks, libellous or defamatory information without further comment or notification. Such posts will also be reported to the hosts (i.e. Facebook), if necessary, and to the Council.

2.9 The use of social media shall not replace other forms of communication but should be complementary to it.

### **3. Councillor's use of Social Media/Code of Conduct**

3.1 Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written and verbal communication. Councillors are required to act in accordance with the Member Code of Conduct whilst acting in their official capacity.

3.2 The key to whether a Councillor's online activity is subject to the Code is whether they are, or appear to be, acting in their capacity as a Councillor rather than as a private individual. Councillors cannot speak for the Council unless explicitly authorised by a resolution made by Council.

- 3.3 Individual Parish Councillors and Council staff are responsible for what they post in a Council and personal capacity. Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and transparent. The tone of content should be respectful and informative.
- 3.4 Content posted on Social Media (including emails) is recorded and permanent so it is important that councillors think about what they say and how it could be perceived. Councillors should think about it as they would when writing a letter or speaking in public and avoid saying anything that they wouldn't be comfortable repeating or justifying.
- 3.5 To ensure Councillors comply with the Code of Conduct, they should note and observe the following guidance:
- i) Ensure that, even when online, they treat others with respect and conduct themselves in a manner that will not bring the Council into disrepute.
  - ii) Be aware of their blurred personality online. Even if posting online in a personal capacity it is likely that they will be seen as acting as a representative of the Council.
  - iii) When setting up a Social Media account consider posting a short statement disclosing their identity as a Councillor and any political party they represent.
  - iv) Be aware that by publishing information obtained from their position as Councillor, they will be seen as acting as a representative of the Council.
  - v) Be aware of irony; it is difficult to communicate sarcasm or irony through short online messages. Your intention may be clear; however, the message may be misconstrued.
  - vi) Not be drawn into an online argument with someone who clearly is trying to provoke them. Simply do not respond.
  - vii) Be mindful if publishing information regarding a forthcoming or on-going matter yet to be determined by council, e.g. a planning application. Any indication of bias or pre-determination could result in the decision becoming void.
  - viii) Be careful about 'liking' or re-posting someone else's post/blog. This may be interpreted as a Councillor agreeing or supporting its content.
  - ix) Be careful about 'sharing' posts to other groups on Facebook. Only share Parish Council posts to approved 'Community Group' pages.
  - x) Be particularly aware of their online presence around election periods. Councillors should note the legislation relating to electoral periods (the Representation of the People Act 1983) will also apply to any of the online publication of electoral material and or statements relating to the election.
  - xi) Ensure the privacy settings for any blog or social media site are set appropriately.

3.6 Councillors and staff must not undertake the following when using Social Media:

- i) Post controversial or inflammatory remarks or use language that may be deemed offensive relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief.
- ii) Use an individual's name or other personal data unless given written permission to do so. This would be a breach of the GDPR.
- iii) Bring the council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity. Ensure personal opinions are not published as being that of the council.
- iv) Post information (images or text) that infringes Copyright Laws. Parental permission must be obtained before photographs or videos of minors are published.
- v) Post information that may be deemed libel. Publishing an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may result in legal action. This also applies if someone else publishes something libellous on your social media site. If it is known about and you don't take swift action to remove it a successful legal claim could result in the award of damages against you.

3.7 Councillors with Personal Blogs should note they are solely responsible for their personal blogs and the Council has no responsibility for the Councillor's personal blog, content or maintenance.

3.8 A failure to comply with Section 3 of this Policy may void any ongoing decision, cause reputational damage or financial loss to the council and an offending councillor may be subject to a standards complaint or personal liability.

#### **4. Councillor's use of Media Devices during Council meetings**

4.1 This Policy applies to all meetings of Full Council, all Committee and Sub-Committee meetings and any other meetings held under the auspices of the Council, at which Members are present whether private or public session, or a combination of both.

4.2 The use of Social Media is not permitted during meetings, as it may distract from proceedings or demonstrate pre-determination or bias or give the impression of doing so. It is important to convey to others, particularly Members of the Public, where present, that Councillors are fully engaged in the debate and decision-making process.

4.3 If a Councillor does need to take or make an urgent phone call, text or e-mail during a meeting they must leave the room quietly, returning to their seat at an appropriate juncture of the meeting. They must not distract proceedings and need to remember that any phone call made or text or email sent must not show any indication of bias or pre-determination.

- 4.4 The Chair of a meeting may ask a Councillor who disregards any part of Section 4 of this Policy to refrain from using the media device and, where appropriate, to leave the meeting.

## **5. Definitions**

*Social Media* - websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. This includes but is not limited to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, Instagram, as well as all online public blogs. For the purposes of this Policy note that Hawkwell Parish Council is only using Facebook.

*Personal Blog* for the purposes of this Policy, a Personal Blog includes any blog that is the sole or joint responsibility of a Councillor. For example, it is owned, managed or maintained by a Councillor. This also includes a Councillor's blog that is hosted by a third-party website, e.g. WordPress.

*Media Devices* for the purposes of this Policy this includes, but is not limited to, mobile phones, tablets, cameras and any other device that is capable of recording sound and image.

## **6. Monitoring and Review of this Policy**

This Policy will be reviewed as necessary.

October 2025