

Nailsea Town Council

Social Media Policy

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Social media is the term for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to communicate with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests.
- 1.2 For the purposes of this policy, 'social media' covers internet sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, blogs, and any similar sites which develop after the creation of this policy. It also includes comments on online newspaper articles.
- 1.3 This policy is designed for councillors and should be considered in conjunction with the Council's Code of Conduct.
- 1.4 The Town Council does not have an official presence on social media. This will be subject to review.
- 1.5 It is the Town Council's policy that councillors and staff are not permitted to use social media during council meetings.

2. Benefits of Using Social Media

2.1 Communication

- Directly communicating important and timely messages, news and information, promoting events and improving awareness of services.
- Being responsive to requests for information or assistance.
- Links to relevant sections of web-sites can be useful.
- Social media offers the opportunity for more relaxed and informal language, but the use of 'text speak' should be avoided or used with caution.

2.2 Engagement

- Seeking opinions, stimulating debate and obtaining feedback, and improving democratic engagement.
- Connecting with a wider audience.
- Sharing knowledge and correcting misconceptions.

2.3 Collaboration

- Creating and utilising opportunities to work together and share information to benefit the work of individuals, groups and the Council.

3. Guiding Principles of Using Social Media

3.1 Be Respectful

Set the tone for online conversations by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language and speak as an individual. Respect the confidentiality of other people and information. As a general rule, users should not post any content or information they would not be prepared to say to the general public in other Council communications.

3.2 Be Credible and Consistent

Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Correct mistakes, but do not alter previous posts without stating that you have done so.

3.3 Be Honest About Who You Are

In social media postings it must be clear in which capacity you are communicating.

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3.4 Be Responsive

Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner, meeting user expectations for the type of social media you are using.

3.5 Be Confident

Feel confident in what you say before you say it, and say it as clearly as you can, having considered how your comments might be construed by members of the public and colleagues.

4. Users' Responsibilities

4.1 Users are personally accountable for what they publish on private social media accounts.

4.2 If personal views are being expressed, this should be clearly stated such as "The views expressed here are my own and may not represent those of the Town Council."

4.3 Use of the Council's logo on a personal account or website is not permitted.

4.4 The requirements of Standing Orders, in particular 'Communication with the Public and Press', must be adhered to.

5. Best Practice

5.1 In legal terms the Town Council is a 'sole corporate body', in other words a single entity. Resolutions of the Council or those made by a committee using its delegated powers are binding on all councillors. While councillors are at liberty to highlight matters contained within a public record as to their views, including how they voted, they are not at liberty to use social media or any other means of communication to campaign against a decision legitimately made by the Town Council.

5.2 In using social media, councillors must

- treat others with respect, avoid personal attacks and not make disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- ensure it is made clear if they have a vested interest in something they are posting.
- identify themselves as a councillor when commenting online on any matter relating to the Council and make it clear whether or not they are representing the views of the Council.

- not bring the Council into disrepute.
- not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activity on behalf of the Council unless authorised to do so.
- not reveal any potentially confidential or sensitive information concerning the business of the Council, its councillors, staff or suppliers.
- not make anonymous posts nor use a pseudonym so as to hide their identity when making comments on Council business.

5.3 Where an online dialogue takes place, unproductive arguments should be avoided and if follow up is necessary this should be taken out of the public domain.

5.4 Libel, defamation, equality, discrimination, Freedom of Information Act, copyright and data protection laws apply to the use of social media. Defamation is the act of making a statement about a person or organisation that is considered to harm reputation. A written defamatory statement is libel.

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6. Safety and Security

- 6.1 Councillors must be aware of their own safety and the risk of identity theft when placing information on the internet and should not publish information giving details which could leave them vulnerable. They should make use of stringent privacy settings if they do not wish them to be accessed by the press and public. It is recommended that passwords are at least eight characters long and use a mixture of letters and numbers.
- 6.2 It is recommended that in the case of Facebook and similar sites, Councillors wishing to keep their personal life and official capacities separate should create different accounts.
- 6.3 Councillors must be aware that comments posted online may be permanently available and can be used by media such as newspapers.
- 6.4 Any Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the Town Clerk and the Police.
- 6.5 The use of an image must only be done with the permission of the owner of the copyright or in the case of individuals, the person concerned or, where relevant, a parent or guardian. Permission from a third party, such as a school, is not transferable.

7. Elections

- 7.1 The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature: this includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
- 7.2 Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.
- 7.3 The Council is not permitted to publish material which “in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party” (Local Government Act 1986).

8. Breaches of this Policy

- 8.1 Violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act 1988 or other legislation, could lead to criminal or civil action being taken against the individual(s) involved.
- 8.2 The Council reserves the right to request the closure of any applications or removal of any content published by Councillors deemed inappropriate or which may adversely affect the reputation of the Council, or put it at risk of legal action.