

Portishead Town Council Social Media Policy – for Council, Member and Staff use of Social Media

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Purpose of this Policy

1.1 Social media is an important means of communication with residents and other stakeholders. The Council welcomes the use of social media but also acknowledges that as a public body its use should be constructive, informative, neutral, and factual.

1.2 It is important that members and staff understand the acceptable use of social media in both council and personal capacities. This policy provides guidance and complements the Members [Code of Conduct](#), that must be observed when acting in the capacity of a Councillor.

1.3 The basic position is that the same standards of behaviour and conduct apply online as offline. Accordingly, this policy is relevant to all forms of written or verbal communication with individuals being personally responsible for the content they publish and share.

What is social media?

1.4 Social media includes websites and online tools that allow people to interact with each other by creating or sharing content, with posts, blogs, tweets, streaming and online discussion. Online communities and networks foster participation, engagement, and conversation in the same way as personal

conversations.

1.5 It provides a unique opportunity to listen, contribute and influence but it must be remembered that it is not a personal means of communication but is broadcasting to everyone using the media.

1.6 There is no requirement for members or staff to use social media. However, if it is used in connection with Council business these guidelines are relevant.

1.7 There are many social media platforms – including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter – but the same guidelines and standards of behaviour are applicable. Members and staff should not say or do anything on social media that they would not do in person or at a public meeting.

Social Media Ground Rules

- Any form of communication is capable of being misunderstood, but the nature of social media means that “misfired” or misunderstood communication is likely to lead to rapid and wide broadcasting of that apparently “controversial” information.
- There are no special legal or ethical rules relating to the use of social media. For Councillors, the same rules apply that govern the rest of their behaviour as a member.
- Social media may be more conversational in tone, but it is still publishing information to the public. Members and staff should be informative, polite, and factual in the information they provide, and look to respond to criticism and engage with misinformation in a factual and non-aggressive way. If abuse is directed at them, they should not engage in arguments or negative comments. The Council has policies to deal with the bullying and harassment of staff and members.
- For Councillors and staff, it is not always easy to distinguish between use in a Council capacity and as a private individual and should always be mindful of the capacity in which they are using social media. In situations, where the distinction between official and private use may be unclear individuals should make it clear whether they are commenting as a Councillor or Council employee or are expressing personal views. At the end of the day, judgement needs to be used, so if in doubt the Councillor or staff member should seek appropriate guidance.
- Some practical advice for social media use:

Never argue with someone who is argumentative.

Trolls can be abusive and aggressive so ignore them. Trolls are generally attention seekers, so it really is best not to engage in debate with them.

Do not get drawn into negative discussions or comments. If a question is asked or incorrect information is expressed, then engage. However, you should always be factual not defensive.

Beware of ‘Sealioning’ which is a type of trolling or harassment when an individual or a group of individuals work in concert to pursue people with persistent or

repeated requests for information whilst maintaining a pretence of civility and sincerity. The person often feigns ignorance and politeness so that if the target is provoked into an angry response, they can then act as the aggrieved party. This technique is designed to disrupt or polarise debate rather than enhance it, answer with factual information and do not engage in further debate.

Legal aspects of social media use

- **Libel** – If an untrue statement is made about a person which is damaging to their reputation, they may take a libel action. The same applies if swift action is not taken to remove libellous content from a website or social media page.
- **Copyright** – Obtain permission before placing images or text on website/social media from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos), otherwise this is a breach of copyright laws.
- **Data Protection** – Do not publish personal data or information that may be used to identify someone or details of their correspondence unless their express permission has been obtained.
- **Bias and Predetermination** – if decisions are being made, do not say anything that suggests a decision has been made on an issue which is to be decided at a Council meeting or committee. Councillors and staff, while their view a particular application may be well known, they need to be able to show that they attended the Council meeting with an open mind, prepared to take on board all the evidence and arguments that may be presented at that meeting before making a final decision.

Social Media Guidelines for Councillors (Members)

1.8 Consistent with the Code of Conduct for Members when using social media in the capacity of a Councillor or speaking on behalf of the Council must reflect the following values:

- **Respect** – do not make personal attacks, rude, disrespectful, or offensive comments. Be careful not to direct points at individuals, as comments directed towards an individual can be seen as disrespectful compared to comments more generally about organisations or policies
- **Equality** – do not publish anything that is hateful, abusive, or demeaning to any group of people on account of disability, ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristic
- **Non-intimidatory** – do not say or condone anything that might be construed as bullying, intimidation, or harassment of any person
- **Transparency & Openness** – be open and transparent but equally remember confidential and commercially sensitive information that is not in the public domain must be protected
- **Confidentiality** – do not disclose confidential or personal information, names or contact details without prior authorisation from the owner of the information or the person concerned
- **Good Repute** – Councillors and staff should not do anything that could bring themselves or the Council into disrepute or could be seen to confer an

advantage or disadvantage on any person by reason of their position at the Council

1.9 Councillors should be clear of the capacity in which they use social media, when posting, sharing, and commenting. Councillors can have “blurred identities” both as a Councillor and an individual. They are entitled to have personal views that may differ from those of the Council collectively, but they should not give the impression they are representing the Council when expressing those views. Councillors should:

- Include an overarching statement on personal social media accounts along the lines of: “***all views are my own and not connected to my role as a town/or district councillor***”
- If Councillors maintain a separate account for Council duties, include a statement along the lines of: “***this social media account relates to my work as a town/district councillor, all views expressed are my individual views as a Councillor and are not reflective of agreed Council policy unless expressly stated***”. In dealing with Council policy or decisions, reference should ideally be made to a statement or document on the PTC Website. If in doubt, check in advance with the Clerk or Chair of the council.

When expressing views as a Councillor that have not been endorsed by Council decisions, Councillors should state that “***my views are expressed as an individual councillor and are not the decided view of the Council on this matter***”.

- Individual Councillors should not normally directly post on Portishead Town Council (PTC) social media or website, as all posts on official Council sites are the collective view of the Council. **All requests for items to be added to Portishead Town Council media should be emailed to the Communications and Media Officer (media@portishead.gov.uk), with the Town Clerk Cc’d**, who will schedule and organise the post.
- However, some items may need urgent attention and require publication out-of-hours. This constitutes **emergencies or emerging events** that will affect residents of the town, such as transport, highways, or flooding problems. In such cases, the Chair or Vice-Chair may post items but:
 - a. A copy of any post should be sent to the Clerk and PTC Media so it can be subsequently reviewed and aligned with other published information on the website or elsewhere.
 - b. Items concerning the development of Council policy should only be posted by Council staff.
 - c. Personal or political views should not be expressed on Portishead Town Council media and all information provided should be neutral, factual, and consistent with decisions taken and other information published by the Council.
- Refrain from publishing any material that can only be accessed as an elected member. Information only available to Councillors should first be made publicly available via PTC or other official media before being referenced.
- Refrain from responding to or commenting on social media posts other than to

clarify facts or answer factual questions. Argument or contentious opinions are best dealt with at an office level with reference to official Council publications and not by individual responses. Posts or comments that are considered to require a response which concern decisions or actions of the Council should be referred to the Clerk, Chair or Vice-Chair of the Council.

1.10 A list of general Do's and Don'ts when using social media is provided in the Appendix.

Social Media Guidelines for Staff

1.11 PTC staff should also adhere to the values expressed in section 5.1 in their personal and work use of social media. Staff must **NOT**:

- Use PTC office computers and accounts for personal social media activity
- Express personal opinions in respect of Council policy or decisions, although liking or sharing PTC published information is acceptable.
- Post disparaging or defamatory statements about the Council, its stakeholders, employees or contractors
- Post or communicate any information that they only have access to by virtue of being a PTC employee or that may identify an individual without their approval
- Respond to any post that that disparages or reflects poorly on the Council - they should refer such items to the Clerk or Chair of the Council

1.12 PTC reserves the right to monitor the use of posts made on public pages by its staff.

1.13 A breach of this guidance may lead to action being taken under the Council's disciplinary policy.

Social Media Guidelines for the Council

7.1. Social media is an important means of communicating and connecting with residents, and it can be helpful in identifying and responding to urgent issues. However, for a small council with limited resources, it is difficult to identify and respond to all posts and so practically it is not a formal means of communication between the Council and Residents.

7.2. PTC will do its best to monitor social media sites and provide an update of significant issues identified to Councillors but cannot be expected to identify all issues, questions or comments that are not directly addressed to the council.

7.3. PTC's website and social media pages should make clear that **the council does not constantly monitor social media and it is council policy to only provide or correct factual information on social media. Questions or comments to which a response is sought should be sent directly to the PTC office by email (office@portishead.gov.uk), the website Contact Us form or by phone 01275 847078.**

7.4. PTC plans to improve and expand its use of social media, but also needs to efficiently manage its resources and so until this policy is next reviewed it has been decided that:

- a. It will maintain Facebook pages but will not use Twitter, Instagram or

LinkedIn or other social media as a means of communication.

- b. Social media will be used as a form of communication with all posts being neutral and fact based, to provide information and to signpost residents to services and sources of information that may be of interest to them.
- c. PTC will not follow or like any other groups, sites or posts other than those of government organisations or community service providers.
- d. As the PTC capacity to respond to comments on posts is limited, PTC will only respond to comments on its social media sites to correct information and provide information that is factual or to direct users to the PTC website or other sources for more detailed information or public statement. It will not engage in debate or argument on social media. Residents will generally be asked to contact the PTC Office with any questions.
- e. PTC staff will monitor social media where possible and bring to the attention of councillors any matters that may require urgent action.

Further information and guidance

1.14 The Council wishes to encourage Members' and staff use of technology and social media. This guidance is intended to promote the use social media in a way that avoids legal and reputational risk. Requests for further information or clarification in connection with social media use should be directed to the Clerk or the NSC Monitoring Officer.

Summary

- Individuals are accountable for their own actions.
- Always be mindful of the capacity in which you are using social media
- Be respectful
- The default for both Councillors and Council staff is that they are posting and commenting as individuals unless the person says otherwise.
- If in doubt on the exact facts, either do not comment or make clear the basis on which you are commenting by using phrases such as “the last update I have”

Media Site/Role	Personal	Councillor	Council Officer
PTC Social Media	Not Applicable	<p>Do not normally post</p> <p>Exceptions are the PTC Chair and Vice Chair who may post in emergency or urgent situations or in the absence of the Media Officer</p> <p>Any posts to be copied to the Town Clerk and Media Officer</p>	<p>Full range of posts including Council Policy and decisions</p> <p>All posts are done / approved by the Media Officer or the Town Clerk</p>
Non-PTC Public Social Media	<p>Free to post/comment</p> <p>Make sure that any views expressed are your own, not those of PTC</p>	<p>Free to post/comment whilst fully observing this Policy document at all times</p> <p>Do not express personal opinions in respect of Council Policy or decisions</p>	<p>Free to post/comment whilst fully observing this Policy at all times</p> <p>Do not express personal opinions in respect of Council Policy or decisions</p>
Personal Accounts	<p>Make a statement on your account "All views expressed are my individual views as a Councillor and are not reflective of agreed Council policy unless expressly stated"</p> <p>Ensure adequate privacy settings on private accounts.</p>	<p>Optional for Councillors to have a "Councillor" social media account separate to their personal account</p>	<p>Not Applicable</p> <p>Ensure adequate privacy settings on private accounts</p>

Approved by Town Council on 18 November 2020

Appendix 1 – Social Media Do’s and Don’ts

Some Do’s:

- Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- Keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views
- Be aware that the higher your profile as an elected member, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network
- Ensure you use council facilities appropriately; if you use a council-provided blog site or social networking area, any posts you make will be viewed as made in your official capacity
- 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 an elected member

Some Don’ts:

- Post in haste, particularly in circumstances where your judgement might be impaired; for example, when tired or if you have consumed alcohol
- Make unguarded statements which could lead to potential liability
- Post comments that you would not be prepared to make on paper or face-to-face
- Use Council facilities or media for personal or political party views
- Use social media in any way to attack, insult, abuse, defame or otherwise make offensive or discriminatory comments about any individual, group, party or organisation, including the Council
- Publish confidential information that you may have learned or had access to as part of your role as an elected member or personal information other than with appropriate prior consent
- Publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public are present or of a confidential nature) or are confidential reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985). Use of social media in meetings must comply with these confidentiality clauses and The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014
- Represent your personal views, or those of any political party or interest group you belong to, as being those of the Council on any social medium
- Browse, download, upload or distribute any material that could be considered inappropriate, offensive, defamatory, illegal or discriminatory
- Make conspicuous, excessive or continuous use of social media technology during the course of a Council or committee meeting so that you give the impression to the public of not being respectful of the proceedings or taking decisions that are not based on full engagement with the facts and arguments presented during a meeting

Appendix 2 – Definitions

Troll: in Internet slang, is a person who starts exchanges of angry or abusive messages or intentionally upsets people on the Internet by posting inflammatory and digressive, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (such as a newsgroup, forum, chat room, or blog) with the intent of provoking readers into displaying emotional responses and normalizing tangential discussion: either for the troll's amusement or a specific gain.

Sealioning: is a type of trolling or harassment when an individual or a group of individuals working in concert pursue people with persistent or repeated requests for information whilst maintaining a pretence of civility and sincerity.