

Axminster Town Council



Social Media Policy (and Press Policy)

Purpose and Scope

This policy covers all Councillors and employees of Axminster Town Council.

This policy is intended to help staff and members of Axminster Town Council make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, wikis, social networking websites, podcasts and other media sharing services, forums, message boards, or comments on websites such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. It outlines the standards which should be observed when using social media, the circumstances in which use of social media will be monitored and the action which will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

This policy is intended to:

- Introduce various forms of social media
- Set down rules governing the basic use of social media
- Provide guidance in relation to the use of social media and to highlight some of the pitfalls to avoid.

All Councillors and employees are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of Axminster Town Council. Only those persons authorised by the Town Clerk (or Deputy Town Clerk in the Clerk's absence) are permitted to post material, or use the Council's logo, heading or imagery on social media websites in the Council's name and on its behalf.

Introduction

Residents are increasingly expecting that local government will provide its services online. Many Councillors and Councils are now interacting with the people they represent online through social media.

However, there are challenges that may discourage Councillors and Councils from engaging in social media use. For example, inappropriate use, (which may occur inadvertently) can cause significant damage to the Council's reputation and even lead to legal claims. In addition the technology involved is changing at a fast pace. This can mean that it is hard to keep up and maintain useful interaction with residents.

The problem Councils now face is that if they do not engage online, residents will still use these networks to talk about Councils, whether they add their voice to the conversation or

not. Residents will expect their councils to engage with them on their terms, via their channels, and to be openly available online. It has become increasingly clear that if councils do not use these tools, the residents will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.

What is social media?

Social media describes those online services which provide easy ways to create and publish on the internet. The term is generally used to describe how content (i.e. text, video and pictures) can be shared and discussed online. As a result social media are changing the way in which Councillors and Councils interact with local people.

The important thing to remember about social media is the term 'social'. It is about communication and about putting the power of the printing press into the hands of the people. Social media will have a far reaching effect on the way we govern and do business.

Nowadays people can publish and share their views, and, more importantly, can engage in conversation with others about those views, with just a few clicks of a mouse.

Examples of social media

- a. Facebook – mainly a website which allows users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues
- b. Twitter – for telling people what one is doing or thinking
- c. Instagram – for showing people pictures
- d. YouTube – for showing people videos
- e. LinkedIn – for professional networking

Legal Issues

Libel

If an untrue statement is published by a Councillor or a Council employee about a person that is damaging to that person's reputation they may take a libel action. This will apply also if someone else is allowed to publish something libellous on a Council website if a Councillor or Council employee knows about it and does not take prompt action to remove it.

Copyright

Placing images or text on any of the Council's websites from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without first seeking permission is likely to breach copyright. Councillors and Council employees should avoid publishing anything they are unsure about.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

Councillors or employees of the Council should not publish the personal data of individuals unless their written permission has been obtained in advance. In addition some information Councillors receive in their role will be subject to confidentiality. This sort of material should not be published online.

Obscene or offensive material

Avoid publishing anything that people would consider obscene or offensive. Publication of obscene material (and some types of offensive material) is a criminal offence.

Axminster Town Council's use of social media

Material published by the Council is restricted in terms of content. It must not:

- a. Contain party political material
- b. Persuade the public to a particular political view
- c. Promote the personal image of a particular councillor or party
- d. Endorse an individual Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations or personalise issues

In addition, the Council should not assist (such as by re-tweeting) the publication of any of the above.

Online Interaction with Councillors by the Council

Axminster Town Council acknowledges that social media channels are now used by many residents for communication and finding information. Therefore, council materials may make reference to the social media accounts of Councillors as a means of contacting that Councillor.

What does the Council consider to be inappropriate or offensive?

Axminster Town Council will not tolerate inappropriate or offensive use of social media and will take action against anyone found to have made any such comments. For Councillors, this could result in comments being reported as a breach of Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Below is a list of examples of the type of comment or material that might fall into this category, this is not exhaustive, however.

Social media should not be used in a way that breaches confidentiality for example by:

- a. Revealing confidential or commercially sensitive information belonging to the council;
- b. Giving away personal or confidential information about an individual (such as a fellow councillor or officer) or organisation (such as a service provider or partner authority)
- c. Improperly discussing the Council's internal workings (such as agreements that it is reaching or its future plans that have not been communicated to the public)
- d. Doing anything that could be reasonably considered insulting, threatening, discriminatory, bullying or harassment of any individual for example by:
 - i. Making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality) disability, sexual orientation religion, age or:
 - ii. Using social media to bully another individual - such as an officer or service user of the Council - or
 - iii. Posting images or comments that are offensive, obscene or links to such content; or

- e. Brings the Council into disrepute for example by:
 - i. Making defamatory comments about the Council, individuals or other organisation or groups;
 - ii. Promotes illegal activity or is intended to deceive; or
 - iii. Breaches copyright, for example by:
 - Using someone else's images or written content without permission; or
 - Failing to give acknowledgement where permission has been given to reproduce something

In cases where there is doubt as to whether proposed content is appropriate the Town Clerk should be consulted before posting.

Issues specific to Councillors

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are certain restrictions on using social media websites for electoral campaigning and extra care also needs to be taken when writing on planning, licensing and other regulatory matters.

Personal use of social media

It is sometimes hard for Councillors, and members of the public, to separate Councillors' public and private lives. Councillors should operate separate "public" and "private" social media accounts to maintain their personal privacy.

Councillors should refrain from mentioning anything council-related on their private social media accounts as the Code of Conduct can still apply.

Allow disagreements but avoid arguments

Some comments may be inappropriate but deleting the comments of people who disagree with members can be counter-productive. Councillors cannot stop individuals from posting the same comments elsewhere, then linking back to a Councillor's site and insinuating the Council is gagging those who disagree. It is not necessary to respond to everything, in these cases comments should be ignored unless they are offensive.

Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature, including web advertising.

Councillors' Code of Conduct

Councillors should not use their private social media accounts to express opinions which might give the impression they are acting as a Councillor, as this online activity may be subject to the Code of Conduct.

Aspects of the Councillors' Code of Conduct will apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Councillors should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Councillors need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- a. 1.2 Treat others with respect. Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- b. 1.4-1.8 of the Code of Conduct.

Councillors should also:

- c. Comply with equality laws. Take care in publishing anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist or anti-faith.
- d. Refrain from publishing anything received in confidence.
- e. Ensure the Council, or the role of Councillor, is not brought into disrepute.

If there is any doubt about any online issues, the Town Clerk should be contacted.

Press Protocol

The Town Clerk is responsible for issuing official press releases on behalf of the Town Council.

- Official press releases will not identify the political party or group affiliation of any Councillor(s) quoted in the release.
- When the media seeks information on an issue that is, or likely to be, subject to legal proceedings then advice should be obtained from the Town Clerk in the first instance, and then the Council's appointed solicitor before any response is made.
- During an election year, from the issue of the Notice of Election until the day following the election, only Officers shall issue press releases;
- All press releases and other materials are copied and filed for reference by the Town Clerk.

Official Council Releases

Official Council press releases and statements will be prepared by the Town Clerk in consultation with Councillors as required.

Any official Town Council press releases shall, in the first instance, be drafted by the Town Clerk, and then emailed to all Councillors for comment, additions or amendments prior to being released to the press.

Councillors who identify a media opportunity should discuss this with the Town Clerk who will, in consultation with other Members as appropriate, decide how this will be followed up.

If a Councillor or an employee receives an approach or enquiry from the media about any matter relating to the Town Council, it should be referred to the Town Clerk.

Councillor Press Releases

Individual Councillors can make their own statements relating to local issues and this policy is not designed to prevent any Member expressing a personal opinion through the media.

Members must make it clear however, that any view expressed which differs from Council Policy are their own personal views and should be recorded as such. Such releases may or may not be political, should bear no reference whatsoever to the Council or any Officer and must not use the Council logo. Neither the Council address, telephone number nor website should be included as a point of contact.

Where a member of the Press wishes to confirm what was said by an individual councillor during a Council meeting, they will be referred to the Town Clerk.

Freedom of Information Requests

All requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act are to be referred to the Town Clerk who, in routine cases will arrange for the information request to be satisfied in accordance with the legislation.

Monitoring and review of this policy

Axminster Town Council's Website Working Party is responsible for reviewing this policy annually, or as and when required to ensure it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.