



## **Social Media and Online Policy**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 This policy covers the use of social media, including social networking websites such as, but not limited to, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube, content communities, websites, and blogs.

1.2 The policy aims to:

1. Ensure that the Council and its employees are protected when using social media.
2. Establish the principles of use of social media by Theale Parish Council employees, Councillors, and volunteers.
3. Provide clear standards of conduct for staff and Councillors when using social media.

1.3 Online behaviour should not differ from offline behaviour, specifically when reference is made to the Council in any context. Users of social media and other websites must realise that what is published has the potential to be accessed for many years, even after the original content has been removed. The Computer Misuse Act introduced 3 criminal offences: unauthorised access; unauthorised access with intent to commit a serious offence; and unauthorised modification of computer material.

1.4 This policy must be complied with, if not disciplinary action may be taken which could ultimately result in dismissal for staff and in a Code of Conduct complaint for Councillors.

### **2 Scope**

This policy applies to all employees, Councillors, and volunteers of Theale Parish Council.

### **3 Social media**

3.1 The Council encourages interaction with its residents, partner agencies, and community groups. If using social media for this purpose staff, volunteers and Councillors must act responsibly and respectfully and ensure that information used is accurate. They must be aware of the image being presented when representing the Council. All Council owned social media accounts and posts should be approved and monitored by the Clerk. Accounts remain under the ownership of the Council at all times.

3.2 Social media should never be used in a way that breaches any other Council policies or expected standards of behaviour.

3.3. It is important to use extreme caution if disclosing any personal information, as this could lead to identity theft, etc.

3.4 Copyright and data protection legislation should be adhered to.

3.5 If you break the law online you will be personally responsible.

3.6 If you are approached by the media regarding any content you have published, you must not respond until you have consulted the Clerk.

3.7 Social media should be used positively to project a good image. It is a powerful tool which can be hugely beneficial and provide valuable opportunities to do this. The use of social media should not involve unprofessional or inappropriate content and must not interfere with Council employees' duties or performance.

3.8 Employees, Councillors, or volunteers may be required to remove content which is considered to breach this policy and any information that will bring the Council into disrepute is not to be discussed, referred to or stated on any internet website or any other social media channel. The Clerk and Chair have the authority to remove any content they feel unsuitable immediately.

3.9 References must not be provided for employees (current or previous employees) on social networking sites as they may be attributed to the Council and create a liability for both the content author and the Council. Internet searches carried out for the formal assessment of candidates for recruitment are not permitted.

3.10 Council employees, Councillors, and volunteers who work with vulnerable adults or children must not use social media either to make social contact with such individuals or to accept invitations from such individuals through social media. This also applies to friends or family of those individuals.

3.11 Although postings should be made by the Clerk, there may be times when the Clerk is unavailable. Therefore, the Chair and the Vice-Chair may be given access to the Council's social media accounts for them to post.

#### **4.Social media – personal use**

4.1 It is wise to approach social networking with a degree of caution as you are joining a global community. Whilst it can have considerable benefits, it can also provide access to individual's personal details from undesirable people/sources. Common sense should be applied - if you are concerned or uncertain about the appropriateness of any statement then you should not post or publish it. It is easy to publish something inadvertently that cannot be retrieved, and that can have far-reaching consequences.

4.2 When using social networking websites, it is important for Officers and Councillors to:

- Be aware that the image portrayed could adversely affect the Council's image
- Use a disclaimer

- Know their obligations (policy, rules etc)
- Be respectful.
- Use privacy controls - take the time to set these appropriately to ensure the right level of privacy protection is applied for you (the default settings vary from network to network).

The Nolan Principles should be followed at all times: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership.

4.3 Employees, Councillors, and volunteers must make it clear when publishing content online that they are speaking on their own behalf by writing in the first person and by using a personal email address. Remember that what is published has the potential to be accessed for many years, even after the original content has been removed. Councillors should be particularly careful as even though being a Councillor should never be mentioned when posting online, a member of the public may know you are a Councillor and may relate your posting to that of the Council or you as a Councillor. The Code of Conduct states that 'This Code of Conduct applies to you when you are acting in your capacity as a councillor which may include when 'Your actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that you are acting as a councillor' and applies to all forms of communication and interaction, including: in electronic and social media communication, posts, statements and comments.

4.4 Information or remarks that will bring the Council into disrepute are not to be discussed, referred to or stated on any internet website or online tool. The Council recognises that certain comments can amount to 'protected disclosures' under whistleblowing laws, which could give protective rights to employees.

4.5 Publishing personal content should not be made using any Theale Parish Council email addresses or logos unless on a Council authorised site and with the permission of the Clerk.

4.6 When communicating with colleagues over social media sites, you are reminded to be respectful and to comply with the Council's Code of Conduct. It is important that you ensure that you avoid the use of swearing or inappropriate language that has the potential to offend others.

4.7 The internet is merely a facility and the approach to dealing with unacceptable behaviour should not differ because it is carried out online rather than offline.

4.8 Individuals (including service users, employees or their families) must not be named, described nor have their photos published on any website, without their express permission being given.

4.9 Cyber-Bullying means 'any use of information and communications technology to deliberately carry out hostile postings to distress another person'. As with any other form of bullying - this is not tolerated and will be dealt with under the Grievance Policy, Bullying and Harassment Policy, or Managing Employee Performance Policy.

Do:

- Watch out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on any blog or page and remove them as soon as possible or report them to the relevant administrator(s) to avoid any perception that you condone such views.

- Set appropriate privacy settings for any networking site used.
- Ensure Council computers, networks, and WiFi are used in accordance with this policy.
- When making political points, avoid being specific or personal about Councillors of the local community or other Theale Parish Councillors. Making political comments should be avoided.

Do not:

- Post comments that you would not be prepared to make in face-to-face contact.
- Comment in haste.

Never:

- Post comments that are in breach of the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy or that incite violence or hatred.

## **5. Guidance for Officers and Councillors on the use of social media and websites**

5.1 Officers and Councillors should be familiar with the terms of use on third party platforms e.g. Facebook - and adhere to these at all times.

5.2 No Council-related information should be published that is not already known to be in the public domain i.e. available on the Council's website, contained in minutes of meetings, stated in Council publicised policies and procedures, or approved by the Clerk.

5.3 Information that is published should be factual, fair, relevant, and transparent.

5.4 Officers and Councillors must be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval/deletion.

5.5 Copyright and data protection laws must be adhered to at all times.

5.6 Conversations or reports that are meant to be private or internal must not be published without permission.

5.7 When referencing external organisations, include the original source wherever possible.

5.8 Do not publish anything that would be regarded in the workplace as unacceptable.

5.9 Officers and Councillors must remember that they are ambassadors for the Council and should always act in a responsible and socially aware manner.

5.10 Facebook pages are to be set up and operated to only allow the administrators to post or approve posts on Theale Parish Council Facebook page.

5.11 Facebook comments are to be monitored and moderated by Officers to ensure they do not breach the published Community Standards (see bullet point below) or contravene Theale Parish Council's policies. Any comments that do, are to be removed and the offending Facebook user will be blocked. Any Officer, Councillor, or volunteer who becomes aware of offensive comments online has a responsibility to inform the Clerk immediately.

5.12 Any comments posted on social media and online should conform to the Council's Online Community Standards:

*'In keeping a positive experience, administrator(s) reserve the right to take down photos, comments and other material deemed unproductive to the Council's purpose. This includes, but is not limited to, vulgar language, disturbing photos, angry or aggressive behaviour towards others, and posting anything in violation of any intellectual property right of another. If someone uses offensive behaviour, or violates these rules, they will be blocked from further participation.' Staff and Councillors should adhere to Council policies at all times and the expected standards of behaviour.*

## **6. Other considerations**

6.1 The Clerk may need support and guidance in dealing with issues of non-compliance with this policy (HR advice can be sought following agreement from the Chair of the Staffing Committee and Chair of Council as such services are chargeable).

6.2 Regulations, protocols and procedures will need to be developed as necessary to protect the Council's ICT systems.

All information on social media is subject to Freedom of Information requests so Councillors and staff should be aware of the Council's liabilities when using social media at work or in their personal life.

## **7. Useful Reference**

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/>

**Reviewed and approved at the Full Council meeting held on 03.10.22**

**Date of next review: October 2024**