



Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

Introduction

This Policy is intended to offer help to Wylam Parish Councillors and Council Staff to make appropriate decisions about the use of social media, and to outline Wylam Parish Council's position on various aspects of its use, including the management of comments made by members of the public. Included in the policy are standards and guidelines when using social media as a channel for communication and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy. The policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Wylam Parish Council website
- Wylam Parish Council facebook page
- LinkedIn
- Email

This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by Wylam Parish Council. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

Over time, Wylam Parish Council may add to the channels of communication it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services the Council delivers. If these changes occur, this policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This policy may be amended at any time.

Wylam Parish Council will use social media/networking to achieve the following:

- Engaging with the community for the promotion of Parish Council-based services, decisions and actions.
- Distribution, in whole or part, of information from Parish Council notices, agendas, approved minutes and dates of meetings.
- Information specifically agreed at Parish Council meetings to be communicated via social media.
- Advertising events and activities that Wylam Parish Council has organised, co-organised, or supports as being beneficial for the community.
- Sharing good news stories relevant to the local area.
- Announcing new information relevant to people living in Wylam.
- Gathering local resident's insights.
- Promoting cultural events or tourism in the area.
- Advertising Councillor vacancies.
- Sharing relevant information from partner agencies such as Principal Authorities.
- Posting other items as the Parish Council sees fit.
- Referring resident queries received via social media to the Clerk for wider dissemination to Councillors if required.

Councillors and staff should be aware that not all communication through social media requires a response, although an acknowledgement should be made if appropriate.

Wylam Parish Council runs its social media pages so it can pass information to residents quickly. Social media accounts will not necessarily be checked daily and posts will not necessarily be responded to.

Though Wylam Parish Council is keen to hear residents' views, it will not be able to take comments made on its social media accounts as official comments or matters requiring action. In order to manage the messages received, residents will be asked (if necessary) to forward their comments to the Clerk of Wylam Parish Council or to attend a Parish Council meeting.

Who is covered by this policy

This policy covers all individuals working at all levels with the Parish Council, including all elected and co-opted Councillors, the Clerk/RFO to the Council and all other employees and volunteers.

All members and staff are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality and interests of the Parish Council, its services, employees, partners and community.

Individual Parish Councillors and staff have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failure to comply with the law may have more serious consequences.

The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of serious breaches of this policy by employees. Such serious breaches may include unlawful, libelous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by an employee.

Breaches of this policy by Volunteers will result in the Council no longer using their services, and if necessary appropriate action will be taken.

The behaviour required by the Parish Council's Code of Conduct shall apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communications. Councillors will bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the Code does not apply.

Councillors must be aware that their profile as a Councillor means it is more likely they will be seen as acting in an official capacity when using social media.

When communicating in a group, it should be ensured that the Council would be content with the statement and that it reflects the views of the Council.

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves communication both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

The Council has a website and associated Facebook page and uses email to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications.

The Council Facebook page is intended to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and promote our community positively.

Rules for using social media

The Council will appoint the Clerk as its moderator. They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content on Council pages, ensuring it complies with this Social Media and Electronic Communications Policy. The moderator will have authority to immediately, without notice or comment, remove any posts from the Council's digital and social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and recorded for Council records.

The Council will appoint the Clerk as its Webmaster to maintain and update the Parish Council website. In addition, members of the Parish Council may be asked to take responsibility for updating certain pages.

Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:

- Be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative and balanced.
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents.
- Be objective, balanced, informative and accurate.
- Do not give out the personal data of others.
- Do not use individual names in social media communications.
- Do not present personal opinions.
- Do not present yourself in a way that will cause embarrassment to the Council.
- Do not make false or misleading statements.
- Do not bring the Council into disrepute, including via content posted in a personal capacity.
- Social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Council at a Council or Committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Predetermination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings.

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Council page are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask Members of the Public, Councillors and Council staff to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abusive language will not be tolerated. Language that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's Facebook page for commercial purposes or to advertise, market or sell products.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Council's Clerk and/or members of the Council by emailing clerk@wylamparishcouncil.gov.uk

The Clerk (moderator) is authorised to remove immediately comments or content that include:

- Obscene or racist content

- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements.
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore it, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available. Any information posted on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page. The Council may post a statement that '*A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed*'. If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

Wylam Parish Council Website. www.wylamparishcouncil.gov.uk

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our councillors for consideration and a response. We may not respond to every comment we receive, particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

The Council may, at its discretion, allow and enable approved local groups to have and maintain a presence on its website for the purpose of presenting information about the group's activities. The local group would be responsible for maintaining the content and ensuring that it meets the Council's rules and expectations for the web site. The Council reserves the right to remove any or all of a local group's information from the website if it feels that the content does not meet the Council's rules and expectations for its website. Where content on the website is maintained by a local group it should be clearly marked that such content is not the direct responsibility of the Council.

Wylam Parish Council Email

The Clerk to the Council has their own Council email address clerk@wylamparishcouncil.gov.uk. This email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Tuesday to Thursday inclusive, and the aim is to reply to all questions sent as soon as possible. An '*out of office*' message is used when appropriate. The Clerk is responsible for dealing with emails received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action. All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Clerk.

Individual councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, and copy to the Clerk. **NB. any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act.**

These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept. Personal information must not be forwarded on to other people or groups outside of the Council: this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

SMS (texting)/WhatsApp

From time to time, Councillors and the Clerk may use SMS/WhatsApp as a fast, convenient way to communicate. Longer messages should be sent by email. All are reminded that this Policy also applies to WhatsApp messages.

Video-Conferencing e.g. Skype/Teams

If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this Policy also applies to the use of Video-conferencing, as does the Council's Code of Conduct.

Internal communication and access to information within the Council.

The Council is continually looking at ways of improving its working. The use of social media and electronic communication is a major factor in delivering improvement.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act (GDPR) in all their work on behalf of the Council.

Confidential Information

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Members should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course, copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

Adopted by Wylam Parish Council at meeting on

Review annually

Next review –