



SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAIL POLICY

1. POLICY STATEMENT

This policy is intended to help all employees, volunteers and Councillors make appropriate decisions about the use of social media such as blogs, social networking websites, forums, message boards, or comments on web-articles, such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn and emails, and all social media sites, including new and niche sites; the principles remain the same.

This policy outlines the standards we require employees, volunteers, and Councillors to observe when using social media, the circumstances in which we will monitor your use of social media and emails, and the action we will take in respect of breaches of this policy.

You are advised to contact the Executive Officer if you are unsure how this policy might apply to a particular situation.

2. THE SCOPE OF THE POLICY

All employees, volunteers and Councillors are expected to always comply with this policy to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of our council.

Breach of this policy by employees may be dealt with under our Disciplinary Procedure and, in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal. The use of social media and email is also included in the Employee Code of Conduct, making clear behavioural expectations in and out of work.

Breach of this policy by Councillors may be dealt with under the adopted Code of Conduct. This includes upholding the seven principles of public life and the reputation of the Council. Violations of this policy by Councillors will be referred to the Monitoring Officer at Northumberland County Council.

3. LEGAL AND STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

The council will abide by any relevant or applicable laws, terms, and conditions to ensure the organisation is not exposed to risks. This includes, but is not exclusively limited to, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998.

Council use of social media must be undertaken in accordance with the council's policies and procedures.

Use of social media sites will always be consistent with the council's duty to safeguard children, young people, and vulnerable adults, in accordance with relevant statutory requirements. Authorisation is required before posting images of minors, in line with safeguarding procedures.

Employees using social media sites for business purposes must maintain political neutrality and not indicate individual political opinions.

In the six-week run up to a local, general, or European election – also known as the pre-election ("Purdah") period – the council must not do or say anything that could be seen in any way to support any political party or candidate. The council will continue to publish important service announcements using social media but may have to remove responses if they are deemed overtly party political.



SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAIL POLICY

4. RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

The council has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this policy.

The Executive Officer is responsible for monitoring and reviewing the operation of this policy and making recommendations for changes to minimise risks to our work.

All employees, volunteers and Councillors should ensure that they take the time to read and understand the policy. Any breach of this policy should be reported to the Executive Officer/Chair.

Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Executive Officer.

5. USING SOCIAL MEDIA SITES IN OUR NAME

Only the Executive Officer, or delegated officers, under the direction of the council, are permitted to post material on the council website and social media, in the council's name or on behalf of the council.

The Executive Officer is the Council's nominated Press Officer with the authority to issue official press releases. No other member of staff or members has the authority to issue public statements on behalf of the Council.

Employees, volunteers, and Councillors are encouraged to share official press releases and postings made by the Executive Officer, on behalf of the council. The Council encourages positive use of social media to engage residents, promote council-supported events, share good news stories etc.

6. USING SOCIAL MEDIA

We recognise the importance of the internet in shaping public thinking about our council and community. We also recognise the importance of our employees, volunteers and Councillors joining in and helping shape local government conversation and direction through interaction in social media.

Before using social media on any matter which might affect the interests of the council ensure that you have read and understood this policy.

When posting personally on social media please ensure you are clear that any views expressed are personal and do not represent the council. Employees/councillors should not identify themselves as such, i.e. as a Cllr or an employee of the Council, if posting in a personal capacity.

7. RULES FOR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Whenever you use social media, you must adhere to the following general rules:

- Do not upload, post, or forward a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content.
- Offensive, obscene, or defamatory content also should not be forwarded, even if not originally authored by the forwarder.



SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAIL POLICY

- Any employee, volunteer or member who feels that they have been harassed or bullied or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a colleague onto a social media website should inform the Chair/Executive Officer.
- Never disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with Chair/Executive Officer.
- No 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 Executive Officer (or officer under delegation).
- Do not upload, post, or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent.
- Before you include a link to a third-party website, check that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.
- When making use of any social media platform, you must read and comply with its terms of use.
- Be honest and open but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the council.
- You are personally responsible for content you publish into social media tools.
- Do not escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.
- Do not discuss employees.
- Always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory.
- Avoid publishing your contact details where they can be accessed and used widely by people you did not intend to see them, and never publish anyone else's contact details.
- Be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval/deletion.
- Think about whether you are acting in a private capacity, or whether any impression might be conveyed that you are acting for and on behalf of Ashington Town Council.

8. MONITORING USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITES

Employees, volunteers, and Councillors should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees under the Disciplinary Procedure and in respect of Councillors, via the adopted Code of Conduct.

Social media monitoring may include any historical material still available online, not just content posted while employed.

Misuse of social media websites can, in certain circumstances, constitute a criminal offence or otherwise give rise to legal liability against the Council and its employees.

A serious case of uploading, posting, forwarding, or sharing a link to any of the following types of material on a social media website, whether in a professional or personal capacity, is likely to amount to gross misconduct (this list is not exhaustive):



SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAIL POLICY

- ❖ pornographic material (that is, writing, pictures, films, and video clips of a sexually explicit or arousing nature);
- ❖ a false and defamatory statement about any person or organisation;
- ❖ material which is offensive or obscene;
- ❖ material, which is criminal, discriminatory, derogatory or may cause embarrassment to the Council, Councillors, or our employees;
- ❖ confidential information about the council or anyone else;
- ❖ any other statement which is likely to create any liability (whether criminal or civil, and whether for you or the council); or
- ❖ material in breach of copyright or other intellectual property rights, or which invades the privacy of any person.

Any such action by Councillors will be addressed under the adopted Code of Conduct and be referred to the Monitoring Officer. Any such action by employees will be addressed under the Disciplinary Procedure and may result in summary dismissal.

Where evidence of misuse is found we may undertake a more detailed investigation in accordance with our Disciplinary Procedure, involving the examination and disclosure of monitoring records to those nominated to undertake the investigation and any witnesses or managers involved in the investigation. If necessary, such information may be handed to the police in connection with a criminal investigation.

Any breach of this policy should be reported to the Executive Officer and Chair of the Council.

9. RULES FOR THE USE OF EMAILS

Emails are the primary method to promote effective communication on matters relating to Council business and therefore should be used for that purpose only.

Employees must use official Council email addresses for all Council business. Members are strongly recommended to use the available town council specific emails. If personal emails are used for council business, confidential information must be protected. Additionally, members should be aware that emails can be the subject of Freedom of Information and Subject Access requests, whether personal or business. You are recommended to use council-provided email where possible.

Messages sent by email should be written in accordance with the standards of any form of written communication, and the content and language used in the message must be consistent with Council best practice. Messages should be clear and concise and directed to those individuals with 'a need to know.'

Councillors and employees should avoid revealing personal information about others online, this includes by email.

If a sensitive or contentious matter needs to be addressed, consider speaking to the recipient first, by telephone or in person, then follow-up with an email.



SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAIL POLICY

Emails should not be used for spreading gossip, or for personal gain, or in breach of any other Council policy and in keeping with Member's Code of Conduct and an Employee's Contract of Employment.

When responding to a large group of recipients, the 'reply all' facility should be used, but caution should be taken that others have not copied in recipients who should not be disclosed to or who have not agreed to share their contact details.

Confidential information should not be sent externally without the approval of the Chair/Executive Officer.

Erroneous email messages can give rise to legal action against the Council or individual Councillors. Claims for defamation, harassment, breach of confidentiality or contract could result. It is vital that email messages be treated like any other form of correspondence and, where necessary, copies should be saved and retained. Messages are disclosable in any legal action commenced against the Council or individual Councillors.

External emails received by individual Councillors should be forwarded to the Executive Officer, and the Chair if appropriate, who will in turn forward to all Councillors.

Misuse of emails in the following categories can lead to action being taken in accordance with the Disciplinary Procedure or the Code of Conduct:

- ❖ Defamation of character
- ❖ Inappropriate, obscene, or offensive content
- ❖ Untrue or malicious content
- ❖ Any discrimination in line with the Council's Equality Policy.
- ❖ Breach of confidentiality

10. MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

The Executive Officer shall be responsible for reviewing this policy annually to ensure that it meets legal requirements and reflects best practice.