



Social Media Policy

This policy has two sections. The first has information about internal usage of social media by staff and elected councillors and the second about our expectations and rules that apply to external users, those who engage with us on our social media platforms and includes our external moderation policy.

SECTION 1

1. Purpose and Scope

This policy is intended to support employees and elected councillors and volunteers in making appropriate choices about their engagement on Witney Town Council's Official social media channels.

The policy provides guidelines for how the council and its employees should represent themselves and the council online, promoting consistency and brand recognition as a trusted source of information and maintaining a positive online presence.

It is also designed to help to assist in ensuring compliance with laws and regulations, minimising legal risks and preventing involvement in activities that could harm the council's or individual's reputation such as confidential information leaks or employee misconduct.

2. What is social media?

Social Media comprises websites, apps and software applications that allow users to connect online and create and share content (news and comment in the form of posts, text, photos, videos, vlogs, blogs, surveys and polls etc). Witney Town Council currently uses:

Facebook

Instagram

LinkedIn

TikTok

Website

X

YouTube

3. How Witney Town Council uses social media

Social media serves as an effective communication tool for Witney Town Council, enhancing our engagement with our residents and community through popular platforms that many people frequently use. It enables the council to address local issues promptly and efficiently and complies with aims and objectives stated in the Communication Strategy and the newly adopted Community Engagement Strategy.

WTC uses Facebook and Instagram most frequently and others for the wider dissemination of important news. Each platform has an appropriate audience 'voice'.

The Communications and Community Engagement Officer, Deputy Town Clerk, Administrative Support Assistant-Communities and Planning and Administration Assistant – Communications & Engagement have access to and regularly create content, post to and monitor Witney Town Council's website and social media. The tone and content of posts is carefully considered for each of the platforms and target audiences.

Acceptable content we share includes:

- Important news from WTC regarding its services and projects
- Promotion of WTC community or civic events and activities
- Sharing images showcasing our events, projects and services, highlighting the work we do.
- Information about Witney and the Council and community
- Emergency announcements.
- Press Releases and Statements
- Competitions
- Vacancies
- Forthcoming meeting agendas
- Shared content from our partner organisations particularly sharing their successes or calls for help.
- Disseminating information from other local councils and local and national organisations
- Important information from neighbouring parishes
- Providing links to our surveys and other WTC consultations

Witney Town Council rarely responds to questions posed on Social Media (unless to simply clarify or correct a basic point about time, date or venue) and does not join in with debate as it is not how the Council does business. There is a reminder on the page to contact us via the info address if a question requires an answer.

We make decisions for individual posts as to whether or not to allow commenting and there are key words that will hide comments that contain trigger words likely to be offensive. This means they are hidden until moderated during office hours. We are flexible about this and do not hide every comment that takes issue or argues with what has been posted unless expletives or information that identifies individual councillors or staff is used.

*Councillors and other staff do not access or post directly to official WTC accounts, but they should take certain precautions, in respect of the Town Council, when using personal accounts or administering public pages. Users should be able to clearly distinguish where information provided by social networking applications is legitimately representative of the Council to avoid risks to its reputation, the reputation of other councillors, staff, volunteers and themselves.

4. Legislation and Regulations

In the UK, social media usage is primarily governed by the Online Safety Act 2023, which aims to protect both adults and children online. This act places new duties on social media platforms to reduce risks associated with illegal activity and harmful content. Several other pieces of legislation also apply, including the Communications Act 2003, the Malicious Communications Act 1988, and the Data Protection Act 2018, which address issues like illegal content, harassment, and data privacy. We take guidance from these and also from our Civility and Respect Pledge.

5. Risks and Pitfalls

Social media has emerged as an essential element of modern life, offering numerous opportunities to reach bigger and broader audiences. In fact, it is impossible to imagine an effective, contemporary communications strategy that does not include it. Yet, ironically many of the features that make it so useful —such as anonymity, rapid information sharing, and easy accessibility—can also pose considerable risks if not carefully managed. Posting incorrect, untruthful or misleading content, could have negative impacts on the personal reputation of staff and councillors or the Town Council

itself and could expose them to the risk of litigation. Other risks and pitfalls to consider when using social media include:

- Data breach and invasion of privacy
- Violations of the code of conduct
- Accusations of libel or defamation
- Exposure to trolling and cyber bullying behaviours affecting mental health
- Cyber-attacks, including phishing attempts

6. Use of social media by councillors, employees and volunteers

When engaging with social media in a personal capacity, WTC councillors, employees, and volunteers should be cautious about the information they share. They must clearly indicate that any opinions expressed are personal and do not represent Witney Town Council, bearing in mind that this disclaimer alone may not be sufficient to prevent posts from being negatively associated with the WTC and therefore potentially impacting its reputation.

However, be aware that this disclaimer may not prevent posts from influencing the reputation of WTC. Exercising caution with regard to tone and content is always recommended while associated with WTC.

Employees should avoid discussing their employer, including upcoming council matters, contractors, commercial or other sensitive information. Confidential information about the council, its councillors, or its employees must not be shared on social media. The views expressed by individual councillors on social media prior to council meetings regarding matters up for debate may be seen as pre-disposition, pre-determination, or bias, which could require them to declare an interest at the meeting.

*Officers using social media in a personal capacity must ensure that this use is strictly personal, and not professional or political.

*As members of the public may nevertheless recognise officers as employees of the Council it is important that officers ensure that their personal use of social media is not damaging to the reputation of the Council.

*If an officer receives any threats, abuse or harassment from members of the public through their use of social media then they must report such incidents to the Town Clerk.

*Where officers use social media in a professional capacity to represent the town council, the town council's corporate identity will be used and not that of any individual officer. Town council email addresses will be used. The use will be non-party political.

*Officers must not download any software, shareware or freeware, unless this has been approved and authorised by the Town Clerk.

*Official Council and Mayoral profiles and pages must not be used for party political purposes or specific campaigning purposes as the Council is not permitted to publish material which 'in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party' (LGA 1986).

*It should be remembered that the role of Mayor is a Civic one and any profile with the office of 'Mayor' being used in the title should be officially set up and administered/monitored through the Town Hall

*Official Council and Mayoral profiles and pages must not be used for the promotion of personal financial interests or personal campaigns.

*Official Council profiles and pages must not be used for the promotion of commercial ventures – with the exception when a commercial venture has given sponsorship to a Council event or capital project – then its sponsorship will be acknowledged as the Town Clerk sees fit.

*Any content posted should be accurate, objective, balanced, and informative, adhering to the WTC Code of Conduct and related policies. Failure to comply with the guidelines could result in appropriate action being taken against an individual.

In addition, WTC councillors, employees, and volunteers should not

- Conceal their identity with false names or pseudonyms
- Share any content of a confidential nature
- Share content about decisions that have not been fully ratified by WTC
- Share any other embargoed news or information until it has been officially shared.
- Disclose personal information about others without permission
- Publish any content that may be considered libelous
- Engage in communication that could be interpreted as bullying or harassment

Failure to comply with these guidelines may lead to a code of conduct complaint or disciplinary action.

SECTION 2

Social Media Moderation

In this policy, we outline our approach to moderating our social media accounts.

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We interact with individuals across various digital channels. While we encourage comments on our social media pages and recognise that differing opinions exist on numerous topics, we do not endorse swearing, discriminatory remarks, or abusive content.

All comments made by the public are reviewed and although they will not be edited, they may be deleted, reported or blocked if they violate the policy described here.

By engaging with us on social media, you agree to the following terms:

1. Comments should pertain to the topic of the council's social media posts
2. We reserve the right to promptly remove or hide posts, comments, or private messages that contain the following content in any format, including text, images, GIFs, videos, etc.:
 - Obscene, profane, or sexually explicit content
 - Defamatory, Misleading, Misinformation or fake news
 - Profane language or aggressive, threatening tones
 - Comments that are unrelated to the content of the post
 - Language that could be interpreted as bullying, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, trolling or abusive towards any individual, religion, ethnicity, minority, or community
 - Links to scam websites
 - Promoting illegal activities
 - Public posts that mention council staff by name or make derogatory remarks or accusations about specific officers or councillors
 - Repeated messages, commonly referred to as 'spamming'
 - Advocating or advertising individual products or services
 - Controversial, irrelevant, or off-topic messages, known as 'trolling'
 - Spam
 - Violations of another individual's privacy by including personal information or details
 - WTC's social media accounts do not permit comments that promote or oppose any individual campaigning for political office.
3. Before removing any posts, we will take screenshots of the offending content and retain these for our records. This ensures there is a documented reason for the removal of the post.
4. If a user repeatedly violates our moderation policy, we reserve the right to ban the user from our accounts, and in certain cases, we may contact the police.

5. We reserve the right to restrict comments on individual posts particularly those where links are provided to take part in consultations and surveys to ensure comments are contributing to the data being collected.

Hate and Harassment

We do not tolerate personal attacks or offensive remarks that target any ethnic, racial, age, or religious group, as well as gender, sexual orientation, or disability status. Such behaviour is prohibited and can be reported.

Hate and harassment may take the form of either criminal or non-criminal actions and behaviour, including, but not limited to offensive comments or images shared on social media or through text messages.

We will remove or block any contributions or contributors who share hate-related messages on our platforms.

Furthermore, we will take screenshots of these posts and report them to the authorities for further investigation.

Hours

Our social media pages are monitored between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

If you require an answer to a question, please email info@witney-tc.gov.uk.

Questions or concerns

If you do notice any offensive comments on our social media channels at any time, please email info@witney-tc.gov.uk. and let us know.

This policy is subject to amendment or modification at any time.