

# Ardleigh Parish Council

## Social Media Policy and Guidelines

### Introduction

The objective of this policy is to provide Councillors and staff an overview of social media and outline the Council's position on various aspects of their use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Staff and Councillor responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

This policy should be read with the Civility and Respect Social Media Guide and Policy Supplement found using this link: [Formal Documents \(ardleigh.website\)](#). It also incorporates guidance from Tendring District Council issued in 2022.

### Definition of social media and what is covered

Social media is applications or websites that encourage and enable users to network. Such applications and websites allow users to easily generate, post and share content such as text, video and pictures – and create conversations on the web. The Council recognises the benefits that these methods of communication can bring but reminds all Members to use social media responsibly and with consideration to this policy and guidelines.

This document covers all social media platforms, including but not limited to Social Networking Sites, Micro-blogging sites, Blogs (including personal blogs as well as comments), Video and Photo Sharing Websites, Forums and Discussion Boards

### Policy Statement and Aims

Social media can be used by the Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement to disseminate information and share content. It is a simple, quick and effective way of communicating. It's also inexpensive and allows a user to reach whole communities at the click of a button. Current profiles 'owned' by Ardleigh Parish Council are Facebook @ardeighpc & @ardleighvh and Instagram @ardeighnp.

The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The Council will make use of approved social media tools for the Parish Council as a whole and for associated activities including the Village Hall and Neighbourhood Plan.

The following applies equally to Officers and Members. Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

The aims of this Policy are to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Council-based services and relevant public information using social media
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media

- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through social media use
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation
- That the Council's reputation is upheld and improved rather than adversely affected
- That communication by use of social media is effective, timely, appropriate, useful, engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (e.g. website, Ardleigh Advertiser articles, linking Facebook to Instagram account etc)

Social media does not stand alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of our general communications. Any planned campaigns, promotions or activities can be posted to social media to increase reach and exposure. We can then encourage users to contact the Council directly (usually via email) to resolve issues or make reports, since comments or social media messages will not be closely monitored and/or may not be the most appropriate way to address issues.

## **Responsibilities**

The Parish Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of the Council social media channels agreed by the Council, assisted by the Deputy Clerk and partners such as Community Halls in Partnership (for Village Hall only).

Councillors may be officially appointed by the Council to assist the Parish Clerk to disseminate information. However, all must ensure they follow this policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Parish Clerk

The Councillor(s) who assist with posting to the Council's social media channels are agreed annually at the Annual Parish Council meeting.

Use of the Parish Council's social media accounts must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion. If unsure, say nothing or check with the Clerk or with Council as a whole.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts, but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure the 'personal view' disclaimer is used.

## **Guidance for Councillors**

The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of Ardleigh issues and the use of social media can help with this.

Since the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will be taken by someone else, it is safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role. Online activity and posts must not bring the Council into disrepute.

These Guidelines should be considered in conjunction with the Council's Members' Code of Conduct. They relate to all use of social media, when acting in any capacity

- When making use of social media, Councillors should make use of stringent privacy settings if they do not wish them to be accessed by press or the public. Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid risks that social networking sites might place on your device.
- You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of

social media and messaging platform.

- Treat others with respect and comply with equality laws.
- Do not disclose confidential information or any personal or sensitive information such as home address and telephone numbers.
- If using third party material, ensure you have permission to share and that it is accurate.

### **Key Points**

- Your online presence reflects on the Council and your role as a Councillor. Be aware that your actions captured via images, posts or comments can affect your ability to take part in Council business and you should therefore weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Ardleigh Parish Council at risk.
- Comments posted on personal blogs other blogs, forums and social networking sites should have clear disclaimers that the view expressed by you are your views alone and do not represent the views of the Council. Be clear and write in the first person. Make it clear that you are speaking for yourself and not on behalf of the Council. Avoid use of the Council e-mail address, logos or other Council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as: *"Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions"*.
- Comments on personal blogs, other blogs, forums and social networking sites should be respectful to the Council, its staff and contractors and the public.
- You need to use sound judgement and control what you publish online. What you publish is widely accessible and will always be available, so consider the content carefully. Even if you delete it, someone may have taken a screen shot of it.

Tendring District Council has produced the below simple guidelines to help Members:

- ✓ **Do** – listen to what people are saying online, consider it and only respond if you feel it is appropriate
- **Don't** – publish anything you would not say in traditional media, for example during the pre-election period, or saying how you will vote on a particular issue
- ✓ **Do** – remember libel and copyright laws still apply to things you post on social media sites and the content you publish is widely accessible and may always be around
- **Don't** – bring the Council, or your Member role, into disrepute
- ✓ **Do** – make it clear whether you are speaking from a personal perspective or as a Member representing the Council or a Member representing your political party
- **Don't** – use social media during Committee meetings if you are a Member of the Committee or taking part in the meeting, if it interferes with or distracts from the business of the meeting

- ✓ **Do** – think about how the public might perceive who you follow on Twitter or befriend on Facebook etc. and what you might share from others which may be seen as an endorsement
- **Don't** – disclose any information which you have received in confidence
- ✓ **Do** - be respectful in your communications with others. Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments (which can be a criminal offence). Think before you publish!
- **Don't** – assume that everyone shares your sense of humour. Others may be offended by the joke you thought was hilarious, or may not realise when you are being sarcastic or ironic.
- ✓ **Do** – look to share content from the Council's corporate accounts, particularly at times of major incidents.
- **Don't** - use social media when angry or under the influence of alcohol. Posting on social media during these times is not advisable.

**Remember** – Although Freedom of Expression provides Councillors with a greater degree of protection when acting as a Councillor, inappropriate use of social media could amount to a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct.

As a Councillor you are in a position where you are able to request information from staff or partners that might not otherwise be publicly available and you will also be included in information sent out to all Councillors. This may be privileged information that is provided to you to ensure you are aware of local issues and to enable you to fulfil your role as a Councillor. You must consider how you use this information since it may be that it is private or privileged. You should check before posting this information on social media.

Councillors should be able to use social media to promote their work without fear of harassment, bullying, defamation or other hate speech; this is finely balanced with comment (and criticism) based upon freedom of speech and political debate.

Should Councillors be concerned about comments made then they should refer to that platform's community guidelines and take appropriate action, such as reporting the comment or post, or blocking users. In more serious cases you may wish to consider seeking legal advice.

If Members are concerned about their safety or security, or feel they are being harassed, you may also wish to report it to Essex Police using the 101 service.

Approved by Council: April 2024

Policy Review: March 2025

Minute No: 24.063 (c)