

**MIDDLETON ST. GEORGE PARISH COUNCIL  
SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY**

**Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this Policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Council-based services through the use of 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 the use of social media
- 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, and engages with a wider audience and utilises cross-promotion of other Council communication tools (e.g. website).

This Policy therefore sets out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Middleton St George Parish Councillors and Employees in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet.

The Parish Council has its own website (<http://middleton-st-george.org.uk/>)

The Parish Council has its own Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/middletonstgeorgeparishcouncil/>)

This policy sits alongside relevant existing policies (e.g. the Communications Policy and the Code of Conduct) which need to be taken into consideration.

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

**This Policy covers those designated by the Parish Council to post on the website, as well as those who have been designated by the Parish Council to post onto, comment and monitor posts, on the Facebook Page.**

The Code of Conduct and Code of Practice is also to be followed by Parish Councillors who go on to share information posted on the Parish Council Facebook Page, comment on its posts or on visitor comments, and/or post or comment on other Facebook Pages or Group pages.

The current Code of Conduct applies to social media activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication.

Individual Parish Councillors and Parish Council staff are responsible for what they post in a Parish Council capacity.

Social media may be used to

- Distribute Parish Council agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Notify residents of the Parish about Planning Applications, and how to respond
- Advertise Parish Council events and activities
- Announce new information from the Parish Council
- Advertise Parish Council vacancies
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other Parish Councillors

## General Pitfalls of Social Media to Be Aware Of

Whilst these tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are some pitfalls to be aware of:

- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. You do not even need to register in many cases to view the content. Registering is only required should you wish to participate and post to the site.
- Groups on specific themes can set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately and it is all too easy to respond instantaneously which can result in unintentionally inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience. Friends of Friends may not be our Friends.

It is also very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

## General Code of Practice

When using social media Parish Councillors and Parish Council staff must be mindful of the information they post in a Parish Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

Parish Councillors' views posted in any capacity in advance of matters to be debated by the Parish Council at a Council or committee meeting may constitute Pre-disposition, Pre-determination or Bias and may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings. Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media that denigrates Parish Councillors, Parish Council staff or residents should report them to the Clerk of the Parish Council.

Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Parish councillors and council staff **must not**:

- hide their identity using false names or pseudonyms
- present personal opinions as that of the Parish Council
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Parish Council
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Parish Council
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks
- engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- use an individual's name unless given written permission to do so
- publish the email address of any other Parish Councillor without their written permission
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes the copyright of others
- post any information that may be deemed libellous
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment

- bring the Parish Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post offensive language relating to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence
- publish untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation as doing so is libellous and can result in a court action and a fine for damages
- post copyrighted images or text on social media as it is an offence to do so. Breach of copyright will result in an award of damages against you.
- publish personal data of individuals without permission as this is a breach of Data Protection legislation and is an offence.
- publish obscene material as it is a criminal offence and is subject to a custodial sentence.

Misuse of social media content that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

The following applies equally to Officers and Members.

This policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks.

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 following guidelines will apply to online participation and set out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Middleton St George Parish Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy.
- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media.
- Never give out personal details of others such as home address and telephone numbers.
- Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act.
- **Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for 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 do not necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions". If unsure, say nothing, or ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view. Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other Council policies when using social media. For example, you should be careful not to breach Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies.
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the authority and employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.
- Remember that people classified as "friends" have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise Council policies or personnel.

- Set your profile's security and privacy settings carefully. At a minimum, all privacy settings should be set to "only friends". "Friends of friends" and "Networks and Friends" open the content to a large group of unknown people.
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at Middleton St George Parish Council at risk.
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- If you find information on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law.
- As a Parish Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.

### **Middleton St George Parish Website**

The Council will appoint one or more nominated "Webmasters" to maintain and update the Parish Council website.

Specific Policy related to those persons designated by the Parish Council to post on the website:

- **Use of the Parish Council's website must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion, particularly when used by a Councillor.**
- **Only add statements approved by either Full Council or the Parish Clerk.**

The website will be used to:

- Distribute Parish Council agendas, post minutes and dates of meetings
- Advertise Parish Council events and activities
- Announce new information from the Parish Council
- Advertise Parish Council vacancies
- Refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other Parish Councillors

### **Responsibilities**

The Parish Clerk is the designated main "Webmaster" of the Parish Council Website, with assistance by the following named Parish Councillors, as agreed by the Parish Council (Cllr Les Foggett). However, these persons must ensure that they follow this Policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the designated main "Webmaster".

## **Middleton St George Parish Council Facebook Page**

Social media provides the Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience instantaneously on a range of subjects relating to its activities, providing updates, news, and information.

**The Parish Council will make use of approved social media tools to quickly disseminate information, but carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks as stated above.**

In the first instance, this will be via its Facebook Page. Facebook will be used to support the website information, as above.

The Council will appoint a nominated Councillor or Councillors as moderator(s). They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content ensuring it complies with the Social Media Policy. The moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory, libel nature.

Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and also the Clerk.

Specific Policy related to those persons designated by the Parish Council to post onto, comment and monitor posts, on the Facebook Page:

- **Use of the Parish Council's Facebook account must always reflect the Council's position/decisions on a matter, and in no circumstances must it be used to express personal opinion, particularly when used by a Councillor.**

- **Only post statements approved by either Full Council or the Parish Clerk.**

### Regarding Posts by Third Parties

a. If a matter needs further consideration it may be forwarded as an Agenda item at the appropriate Committee meeting or Parish Council meeting for consideration by a quorum of Councillors. The poster shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case. When this is necessary, the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.

b. If the moderator feels unable to answer a post for example of a contentious nature, this shall be referred to the Parish Clerk. The poster will inform by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Parish Clerk directly.

c. The nominated moderator or moderators shall remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libelous or defamatory information without further comment or notification.

d. Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk of the Council. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

## **Responsibilities**

Cllr Gilson (Vice-Chair of the MSG Parish Council), is the designated Admin of the Council Facebook Page, with editorial and monitoring access by Cllr Wilson (Chairman of MSG Parish Council), as agreed by the Parish Council. However, these persons must ensure that they follow this Policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the designated Council Admin person.

## **An Important Note about the Difference Between a Facebook Page and a Facebook Group**

A Facebook Page acts as the prime presence on Facebook. It is an official “window” online, much like a website. In the same way the Parish Council website must conform to agreed policy, so must the Parish Council Facebook Page. Therefore, whatever is posted on there by the designated members of the Parish Council must be the position taken by the Parish Council as a whole. It acts, just as the website, as primarily a means to provide information. The Page can also be strictly controlled, as the website.

A Facebook Group is different, in that it is more informal. A Facebook Group can be set up and linked to a Page. It can be an “open group” or a “private group”. Extreme care must be taken if such groups are used. They can be monitored to a point by the Admins, but it is easier for any information and comments posted and shared to become unmonitored and controlled. **For this reason, Middleton St George Parish Council has decided not to set up a MSG PC Facebook Group linked to its official Facebook Page.**

However, any information posted on the MSG Facebook Page, may easily be shared to other Facebook Groups within the village of Middleton St George, thus disseminating and sharing information. **It must be noted, however, that members of the Parish Council must still adhere to the Policy when posting, sharing and commenting on posts in these Facebook Groups.**