SHAFTESBURY TOWN COUNCIL

Delivering Excellence across the Shaftesbury Community

SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA POLICY

Date of Adoption: 12th January 2021
Reviewed: 17th December 2024
Review Date: December 2027

Internal Operations Policies

1. Introduction

This policy provides a framework for managing Shaftesbury Town Council's communications and media interactions, including its use of social media. The policy is designed to facilitate effective communication, engagement, and collaboration with residents, media outlets, and other stakeholders, while adhering to legal requirements and best practices.

2. Key Principles

The Council's communication efforts are guided by three key principles:

- Communication: Deliver timely and important messages, news, and information to promote events and improve awareness of services.
- Engagement: Foster conversations, gather opinions, and correct misconceptions by engaging residents directly.
- Collaboration: Share information and work together to enhance the Council's perception and service areas.

3. General Guidelines for Social Media and Communication

3.1. Legal Considerations:

- Publishing false, defamatory content can lead to libel claims.
- Posting copyright-protected images or content without permission may result in legal action.
- Personal data should not be shared without consent, in accordance with data protection laws.
- Obscene or inappropriate content is a criminal offence and should not be posted.

3.2. Security:

- All devices used for Council communications must be secured with strong passwords.
- Social media and email accounts are subject to monitoring based on Council policy and inappropriate use may lead to disciplinary actions.

4. Official Social Media Channels

Shaftesbury Town Council maintains several social media accounts including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The use of social media is aimed at:

- Advertising events, activities, and job vacancies.
- Promoting Council decisions and services.
- Sharing news and information from partners and community groups.
- Gathering community input on consultations.

Operating Hours: The Council monitors social media from Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm, excluding public holidays. Messages may not always receive direct replies but are acknowledged.

4.1. Conduct:

- Council staff and members must not post confidential, offensive, or libelous material.
- Content shared should be accurate, balanced, and informative.
- Abusive or offensive posts on official channels will be removed, and users may be blocked.

5. Media Engagement and Press Releases

5.1. Contact with the Media:

- The Town Clerk is the primary point of contact for media relations. The Town Mayor and the Chair of Planning & Highways may also engage with the media in consultation with the Town Clerk.
- Any Councillor speaking to the media must clarify whether they are representing the Council or expressing personal views.

5.2. Press Releases:

- Press releases should be factual, non-political, and non-offensive.
- They should only be issued by the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Mayor or Chair of Planning & Highways where appropriate.

6. Social Media Use by Councillors and Staff

6.1. Staff:

- Should not present personal opinions as Council positions.
- Must not post confidential or inappropriate content.
- Any misuse of social media may result in disciplinary action.

6.2. Councillors:

- Councillors are reminded that their posts may be permanent and visible to the public indefinitely.
- Individual councillors who choose to use a personal social media account to communicate with the community it is serving, need to remember that the code of conduct and standards in public life rules still apply. The councillor shall not bring the council into disrepute and should act with honesty and integrity.
- Councillors should not post defamatory or inflammatory content, nor engage in conduct that is in contravention of the code.
- Councillors should not use social media to criticise the council's decision, even if they voted against it. A councillor's own personal opinion is not paramount in the collective decision-making process of the local council.

7. Moderation of Council Social Media

7.1. Responsibilities:

- Council officers are responsible for moderating official Council social media accounts and ensuring compliance with this policy.
- Offensive, defamatory, or threatening posts will be removed, and users may be reported to appropriate authorities, such as the police or safeguarding units.

8. Legal Framework

- Communication is governed by the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988, as well as the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
- Publicity must be factual, objective, and not used for political purposes.
- Confidential documents and personal information must not be leaked to the media.
- Permission must be obtained for using copyrighted materials, including photographs of individuals under 18, which require parental consent.

9. Election Periods

- During election periods, proactive publicity featuring individual Councillors is restricted.
- The Council will not engage in publicising individuals who are candidates during the election period, except in emergency situations or when necessary for official business.

10. Complaints and Disciplinary Actions

10.1. Social Media Complaints:
Social media should not be used to raise formal complaints with the Council. Official complaints must follow the Comments, Compliments, and Complaints Protocol.

10.2. Disciplinary Action:
Breaches of this policy, including inappropriate use of social media or unauthorised media communications, will result in disciplinary action as per the Council's Disciplinary Policy (for staff) and complaints via the Code of Conduct (for councillors)

This combined policy sets a clear framework for Shaftesbury Town Council's use of social media, communications with the public, and relations with the media, ensuring that all communications are conducted professionally, legally, and in the best interests of the community.