



St Teath Parish Council Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

The use of digital social media and electronic communication enables the Parish Council to interact in a way that improves the communications both within the Council and between the Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves.

The Council has a website, communicates through St Teath Community Facebook pages and uses email and SMS text to communicate. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services it delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

Policy Statement

This policy is intended to help employees including the Clerk/ RFO and casual employees (collectively referred to as employees in this policy), Councillors and any relevant volunteers to 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 Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and emails.

This policy outlines the standards required by employees, Councillors and any relevant volunteers to observe when using social media and emails, the circumstances in which the Council will monitor the use of social media and the action that will be taken in respect of breaches of this policy.

Scope of the Policy

All employees, Councillors and any relevant volunteers are expected to comply with this policy at all times to protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the Council.

Breach of this policy by employees and Councillors may be dealt with under the adopted Code of Conduct or Disciplinary Procedure and, in serious cases, may be treated as gross misconduct leading to summary dismissal in the case of employees.

Social Media

The importance of the internet in shaping public thinking about the Council and community is recognised, as is the importance of employees, Councillors and volunteers 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:

- a) All employees and Councillors have read and understood this policy
- b) All employees and volunteers must have sought and gained prior written approval to do so from the Full Council.

The Council uses the St Teath Community Facebook pages to provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within our Parish and to promote our community positively.

Only the Parish Clerk and Chair, or Vice Chairman in the absence of the Chairman, in consultation with the Full Council, is permitted to post material in the Council's name and on behalf of the Council.

Communications from the Council will meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, honest, tasteful and relevant as well as being mindful of the impact a contribution may make to the public's perceptions of the council;
- Not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive. This includes forwarding a link to any abusive, obscene, discriminatory, harassing, derogatory or defamatory content;
- Will not escalate heated discussions, and instead try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations;
- Will always consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g. politics and religion;
- Specifically, social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising.
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright. This includes including a link to a third party website, confirm that the third party's consent has been given and check that any terms and conditions of that website permit the link to it;
- Not contain any personal information.

When making use of any social media platform, its terms of use must be read and complied with.

Employees, Councillors and any relevant volunteers are personally responsible for any content they publish into social media tools, whether it is on behalf of Council business or of personal use.

In order to ensure that all Council posts are productive, respectful and consistent with the Council's aims and objectives, we ask you to follow these guidelines:

- Be considerate and respectful of others. Vulgarity, threats or abuse of language will not be tolerated.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including the Council members or staff, will not be permitted.
- Share freely and be generous with official Council posts, but be aware of copyright laws; be accurate and give credit where credit is due.
- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Council's posts for commercial purposes or to advertise market or sell products.

Personal/private information should not be included in social media replies to Council posts.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through these channels. Instead, please make direct contact with the Parish Clerk and/or members of the Council via telephone, email or post.

We retain the right to take measures to remove comments or content that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarised material; any material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam
- Alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law

The Council's response to any communication received not meeting the above criteria will be to either ignore, inform the sender of our policy or send a brief response as appropriate. This will be at the Council's discretion based on the message received, given our limited resources available.

Any information posted not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible and measures taken to block repeat offenders. The Council may post a statement that 'A post breaching the Council's Social Media Policy has been removed'.

If the post alleges a breach of a Council's policy or the law the person who posted it will be asked to submit a formal complaint to the Council or report the matter to the Police as soon as possible to allow due process.

Any employee, Councillor or any relevant volunteer 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 Chairman and Parish Clerk.

Social Media Monitoring

Employees and Councillors should be aware that any use of social media websites (whether or not accessed for council purposes) may be monitored and, where breaches of this policy are found, action may be taken against employees and Councillors under the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure.

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.

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

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

Any such action will be addressed under the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure and for employees may result in summary dismissal.

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

Any breach of the policy should be reported to the Parish Clerk and Chairman of the Council.

Parish Council Website

Where necessary, we may direct those contacting us via social media to our website to see the required information, or we may forward their question to one of our Councillors for consideration and response. We may not respond to every comment we receive particularly if we are experiencing a heavy workload.

Only the Clerk in consultation with the Councillors is permitted to post material on the Council website in the Council's name and on behalf of the Council.

The website will be kept up-to-date and provide a platform for finding relevant information regarding the Full Council, its roles and responsibilities as well as any actions/projects it may be working on.

Parish Council Email

The Parish Clerk to the Council has their own council email address (clerk@stteathparishcouncil.gov.uk) which is used for all general Parish Council correspondence.

The email account is monitored mainly during office hours, Monday to Friday, and we aim to reply to all questions sent as soon as we can.

An 'out of office' message should be used when appropriate.

The Parish Clerk is responsible for dealing with email received and passing on any relevant mail to members or external agencies for information and/or action.

All communications on behalf of the Council will usually come from the Parish Clerk, and/or otherwise will always be copied to the Parish Clerk.

All new emails requiring data to be passed on, will be followed up with a Data Consent Form for completion before action is taken with that correspondence.

All Parish Councillors also have their own Council email addresses which they must use for all correspondence in relation to the Parish Council.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to communicate directly with parishioners in relation to their own personal views, if appropriate, but should copy any communication to the Parish Clerk. NB any emails copied to the Clerk become official and will be subject to The Freedom of Information Act. These procedures will ensure that a complete and proper record of all correspondence is kept.

Councillors must not forward personal information on to other people or groups outside of the Council, this includes names, addresses, email, IP addresses and cookie identifiers.

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

necessary, consider speaking to the recipient(s) first by telephone or in person, then follow up with an email.

Emails should not be used for spreading gossip, or for personal gain, or in breach of any of the Council's Codes of Conduct relating to bullying, intimidation, sexual or racial harassment.

Messages sent by email are to be written in accordance with the standards of any other 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", such as members of a Working Group. However, when responding to a large group of recipients, the "reply to all" facility should be used to ensure all parties receive the same information you wish to impart.

Confidential information should not be sent externally without the approval of the Chairman or Clerk.

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 therefore vital for email messages to be treated like any other form of correspondence and, where necessary, hard copies or copies saved to file should be retained. Messages are also disclosable in any legal action commenced against the Council or Councillors relevant to the issues set out in the email.

External emails received by a Councillor are to be forwarded to the Parish Clerk - and the Chairman if appropriate - who will in turn forward to other Councillors.

Misuse of emails in the following categories can lead to a breach in the CBPC Codes of Conduct Policy, leading to a Complaint and Disciplinary Procedures:

- a) Defamation of character
- b) Inappropriate, offensive or obscene content
- c) Untrue or malicious content
- d) Discriminatory on grounds of race, sex, age, marital status, disability, sexual orientation, religion or religious beliefs and philosophical beliefs
- e) Breach of Council confidential information.

SMS (Texting)

Councillors and the Parish Clerk may use SMS as a convenient way to communicate at times.

All are reminded that this policy also applies to such messages.

Video Conferencing (Teams etc)

If this medium is used to communicate, please note that this policy also applies to the use of video conferencing.

Internal communication and access to information within the Council

The Council is continually looking at ways to improve its working and the use of social media and electronic communications is a major factor in delivering improvement.

Councillors are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct and the Data Protection Act in all their work on behalf of the Council.

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely.

Councillors are expected to maintain an awareness of the confidentiality of information that they have access to and not to share confidential information with anyone. Failure to properly observe confidentiality may be seen as a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct and will be dealt with through its prescribed procedures (at the extreme it may also involve a criminal investigation).

Councillors should also be careful only to cc essential recipients on emails i.e. to avoid use of the 'Reply to All' option if at all possible, but of course copying in all who need to know and ensuring that email trails have been removed.

Responsibility for implementation of the Policy

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

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

All employees, Councillors and any relevant volunteers should ensure that they take the time to read and understand this policy. Any breach of it should be reported to the Chairman and/or Vice Chairman of the Council.

Questions regarding the content or application of this policy should be directed to the Parish Clerk.

Adopted on: 2 November 2023