



Coniston Parish Council **Social Media Policy**

Background

Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. The Policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include (but are not limited to):

- Parish council website
- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Parish Council Emails.

The principles of this Policy apply to Parish Councillors and to the Clerk to the Council. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which need to be taken into consideration.

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

Rules & Expectations

We promise that any communications from the Parish Council will meet the following criteria:

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, for which we do not own the copyright;
- not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- if official council business it will be moderated by a nominated Councillor or Councillors
- social media will not be used for the dissemination of any political advertising

Equally, we expect any communications to the Parish Council to meet the following criteria:

- be civil, tasteful and relevant;
- not contain content that is unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- not contain content copied from elsewhere, for which the enquirer does not own the copyright;
- not sending large volumes of the same message (also called "spamming");

- not to contain anyone's personal information, other than necessary basic contact details.

Coniston Parish Council's response to any communications 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 on the Facebook page not in line with the above criteria will be removed as quickly as practically possible. Repeat offenders will be blocked from the Facebook page.

Website

Coniston Parish Council runs a website (www.coniston.info) and publishes the following information:-

- Draft minutes after meetings
- Approved Minutes of meetings
- Councillors Declarations of Interest forms
- News articles including agendas for the next meeting
- Relevant other information

The Clerk to Coniston Parish Council will maintain and regularly update the website. Requests for articles and information to be published on the website should be sent to the Clerk.

E-mail

The Clerk to Coniston Parish Council is responsible for the e-mail address for the council (parish@coniston.info) and passing any e-mails on to the relevant Member or external agency to action. E-mails are monitored periodically and will be responded to within 10 working days.

Facebook & Twitter

The Coniston Parish Council Facebook pages and Twitter account intends to:

Provide information and updates regarding activities and opportunities within Coniston Parish and promote positive thoughts and comments from residents within the parish

In order to ensure that all discussions on the Coniston Parish Council page are productive, respectful, energized and consistent with the Council's mission and goals, we ask you to follow these guidelines in addition to the above rules:

- Stay on topic.
- Refrain from using the Facebook page and Twitter account for commercial purposes or to market products.

The sites are not monitored 24/7 and we will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavor to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people.

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 the Facebook channel. Instead, please see our contact details on www.coniston.info. Please do not include personal/private information in your Facebook posts/messages to us.

Non-compliance will not be tolerated and can result in a ban

Coniston Parish Council is not responsible for the accuracy of content posted by any subscriber in any forum; opinions expressed in comments on Coniston Parish Councils social media forums do not necessarily represent those of Coniston Parish Council.

All comments, once posted, become the property of Coniston Parish Council and we reserve the right to reproduce, distribute, publish, display or edit. Derivative work can also be created from such postings or content, and used for any purpose, in any form and on any other media.

Coniston Parish Council is not responsible, liable for and do not endorse the privacy practices of Facebook or any linked websites. Your use of Facebook and any linked websites is at your own risk.

Coniston Parish Council assumes no responsibility or liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred as a result of any use or reliance upon the information and material contained within or downloaded from these websites.

Facebook may occasionally be unavailable and we accept no responsibility for this lack of service.

The presence of any advertisement on Facebook is not an endorsement of the authenticity or quality of the goods, services or website and Coniston Parish Council will not be held responsible for any claims arising in that respect.

We will not engage in/with, and we discourage posts or comments on, issues of a political nature.

This comment policy may be revised at any time.

By choosing to comment and/or utilise any Coniston Parish Council Social Media site, users are deemed to agree to this policy.

Additional background information (Improvement and Development Agency) 2010

Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

Copyright

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

Obscene Material

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents

The Council's Legal Position

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the Council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Members' Code of Conduct

Councillors can have 'blurred identities', you may have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is the need to get social media accounts / profiles clear, to be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing the Parish Council.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the Council, for

example blogging as a councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a councillor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgement than a hard and fast line. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most councillors are using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straight forward decision. Since the judgement of whether you are perceived to be acting as a councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their Council, local police service or councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some councillors wait to be followed themselves first. Do make use of other communication functions that social media allows you. Twitter's 'list' function, for example, can help you to follow local people in a less direct way. And bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance.

Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake; perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

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