South Petherwin Parish Council: policy on elected members' use of social media

Purpose and scope

This policy is for all elected members when using social media in their capacity as councillors. This includes circumstances where a councillor is acting or is reasonably perceived by the public to be acting, in their role as an elected member of the council.

This guidance is intended to assist members in using an important communications channel (social media) in a way that supports local democracy, the council's delivery of key services and public confidence in local government.

Relationship with the Members' Code of Conduct

This policy sits alongside the council's Members' Code of Conduct (May 2021).

Use of language in this guidance

Where this guidance uses words such as "should" or "avoid", these indicate recommended practice. Where legal duties apply, this is made explicit. Councillors remain personally responsible for complying with the law at all times.

Safety

This section outlines recommended steps councillors can take to protect themselves and others when using social media.

Setting up your accounts securely:

- Use strong, unique passwords for each social media account.
- Avoid using your councillor or council email address to log in, as these may be publicly available.
- Enable two-factor authentication (2FA) on all platforms – this adds an extra layer of protection by asking for a code sent to your phone or email when you log in.
- Regularly review your security settings and update passwords if you suspect your account may have been compromised.

<u>Protecting your privacy</u>

Maintain a clear boundary between your personal life and your public role.

- Review privacy and tagging settings on all platforms
- Avoid posting personal information such as your home address, phone number, date of birth or details about your family.
- Be mindful that friends, family and neighbours may not wish to have their information shared.
- Where possible, avoid sharing information which may suggest that your home is currently unoccupied.

<u>Staying alert</u>

- Be alert to phishing* messages, suspicious links and fake accounts.

- Report any abusive, threatening or inappropriate behaviour to the social media platform and, where appropriate, to your council or the police.
- If you are concerned about your safety or receive repeated harassment, speak to your council, the county council monitoring officer, or the police
- It is far safer to report concerns early, even if you are unsure whether they are serious.

*(a fraudulent communication, such as an email or text, designed to trick you into revealing sensitive information like passwords, credit card numbers, or other personal details).

Legal considerations

Councillors are personally responsible for what they post online. The same legal standards apply online as offline. Social media posts are subject to a high level of public scrutiny due to their accessibility and permanence.

Defamation and libel

Defamation includes libel, which is defamation in written or published form, including online. A person who publishes an untrue statement that damages another's reputation may be liable in defamation. Both individuals and organisations may bring claims.

Repeating a defamatory statement may also give rise to liability. This can include sharing content and, in some circumstances, other forms of online engagement where this amounts to republication.

Copyright

Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (for example, extracts from a publication or photographs) without permission may infringe copyright law. Members should ensure they have appropriate rights before sharing content created by others.

Data protection

Councillors should not publish personal data about individuals without a lawful basis to do so. Personal information obtained through correspondence or private exchanges should not be shared publicly unless there is clear consent or another lawful basis.

Bias and predetermination

Where councillors are involved in planning, licensing or other quasi-judicial decisions, they should avoid social media activity that could give the impression that they have made up their mind in advance.

Expressing a preliminary view is not unlawful in itself. However, councillors must be able to demonstrate that they approached the formal decision-making process with an open mind and were genuinely prepared to consider all relevant evidence.

Code of conduct

Online activity may fall within the scope of the Members' Code of Conduct. Even where a councillor intends to act in a personal capacity, the public may perceive them as acting as a councillor. Where in doubt, members should seek advice before posting.

Contempt of court

Councillors, like all members of the public, must take care not to publish material that could interfere with active legal proceedings. Once proceedings are active, publishing content that creates a substantial risk of serious prejudice may amount to contempt of court.

Members should avoid sharing content that assumes guilt, identifies individuals where identification is an issue, or could influence jurors or witnesses. Particular care is required in relation to victims, children and vulnerable groups.

Reputational considerations

Councillors are visible representatives of their communities and their councils. Social media activity can directly affect public trust and confidence.

Members are encouraged to engage constructively, maintain a professional tone and avoid posting in anger or responding to provocation. Blocking or reporting persistently abusive individuals can be appropriate and proportionate.

Members should remember that deleted posts may still be captured and shared elsewhere.

In summary:

- Think before posting
- Do not rely on disclaimers such as "All views are my own"
- Only post information you would be comfortable saying in a public meeting or seeing reported in the local press.
- Avoid sharing unverified information or speculation.

If in doubt, members should refer to their council's Members' Code of Conduct or seek advice from relevant officers.

Adopted at Parish Council meeting 11th November 2026