



Working for the Community in Rotherfield, Mark Cross, Eridge Green, Boarshead and surrounding areas

Social Media, Digital Communications and Acceptable Use Policy

• 1. Introduction

Rotherfield Parish Council ("the Council") recognises that social media and digital communications are important tools for engaging with residents, promoting local democracy, sharing information, and supporting community engagement.

This policy sets out:

- the standards expected when using social media and digital communications on behalf of the Council;
- the responsibilities of councillors, employees, contractors, volunteers and co-opted members;
- acceptable use of Council IT systems, email accounts, websites and devices;
- how the Council complies with relevant legislation and guidance.

This policy applies to:

- all councillors;
- employees and contractors;
- volunteers acting on behalf of the Council;
- anyone authorised to publish content using Council communication channels.

This policy should be read alongside:

- the Councillor Code of Conduct;
 - Data Protection Policy;
 - Privacy Notices;
 - Freedom of Information Publication Scheme;
 - Complaints Policy;
 - Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures;
 - Safeguarding Policies;
 - Equality and Diversity Policy.
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• 2. Legislative and Regulatory Framework

This policy has been prepared with reference to current UK legislation and guidance including:

- Local Government Act 1972;
- Localism Act 2011;
- Data Protection Act 2018;
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR);
- Freedom of Information Act 2000;
- Environmental Information Regulations 2004;
- Equality Act 2010;
- Human Rights Act 1998;
- Defamation Act 2013;
- Malicious Communications Act 1988;
- Communications Act 2003;
- Computer Misuse Act 1990;
- Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988;
- Online Safety Act 2023;
- Public Records Act 1958;
- The Nolan Principles of Public Life;
- National Association of Local Councils (NALC) guidance;
- Local Government Association (LGA) guidance on councillor use of social media.

All users must ensure that online activity complies with these legal requirements.

• 3. Policy Objectives

The Council will use digital communications to:

- provide accurate and timely information to residents;
- promote Council services, meetings and events;
- encourage community participation and engagement;
- improve transparency and accountability;
- support emergency communications where appropriate;
- signpost residents to partner organisations and statutory agencies.

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The Council will aim to ensure that all digital communication is:

- lawful;
- respectful and inclusive;
- factual and objective;
- accessible;
- secure;
- proportionate;
- politically neutral.

• 4. Official Council Communication Channels

Official Council communication channels may include:

- the Council website;
- Council email accounts;
- Facebook;
- Instagram;
- X (formerly Twitter);
- YouTube;
- LinkedIn;
- community messaging services;
- newsletters and electronic bulletins;
- any future digital platforms approved by the Council.

Only authorised persons may create or administer official Council accounts.

The Clerk shall maintain a register of:

- official social media accounts;
- authorised administrators;
- login and recovery arrangements;
- retention arrangements for records.

Council accounts remain the property of the Council at all times.

• 5. Roles and Responsibilities

5.1 The Council

The Council is responsible for:

- approving this policy;
- ensuring adequate governance arrangements;
- ensuring appropriate training and oversight.

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5.2 The Clerk

The Clerk is responsible for:

- overall administration of Council communications;
- authorising content where necessary;
- ensuring compliance with legal obligations;
- maintaining security and access controls;
- retaining official records.

5.3 Councillors

Councillors are personally responsible for content they publish online.

When identifying themselves as councillors, they must:

- uphold the Councillor Code of Conduct;
- act respectfully and lawfully;
- distinguish clearly between personal and Council views;
- avoid bringing the Council into disrepute.

5.4 Employees, Contractors and Volunteers

Employees, contractors and volunteers must:

- comply with this policy;
- follow management instructions;
- protect confidential information;
- Maintain professional standards at all times.

6. Standards for Use of Social Media

Users of Council communication channels must:

- be courteous and professional;
- use clear and plain English where possible;
- ensure information is accurate before publication;
- correct errors promptly;
- respect confidentiality;
- consider accessibility requirements;
- avoid unnecessary political comment.

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Users must not:

- publish false or misleading information;
- engage in bullying, intimidation or harassment;
- post discriminatory, defamatory or offensive material;
- disclose confidential or personal information;
- make personal attacks;
- publish content that could prejudice Council decisions;
- post material that breaches copyright;
- use anonymous or fake profiles to discuss Council matters;
- publish content that could damage public confidence in the Council;
- use Council resources for party political purposes.

Users should avoid arguments or prolonged disputes online. Concerns or complaints received through social media should normally be referred to the Clerk.

• 7. Personal Use of Social Media

Councillors and employees may use social media in a personal capacity.

However, where individuals can be identified as associated with the Council, they should:

- make clear when views are personal;
- avoid implying Council endorsement;
- maintain respectful conduct;
- avoid discussing confidential Council business;
- avoid posting during meetings where it may disrupt proceedings.

Personal social media activity may still be subject to the Councillor Code of Conduct, employment policies or relevant legislation where it impacts the Council or public confidence.

• 8. Election Periods and Political Impartiality

During periods of heightened political sensitivity, including local or national elections, Council communications must remain politically neutral.

Council channels must not:

- support or oppose political parties or candidates;
- publish material that could reasonably be interpreted as political campaigning;
- use public resources to influence voters.

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The Clerk may restrict or delay publication of material during pre-election periods where appropriate.

• 9. Moderation and Public Interaction

The Council welcomes constructive engagement.

The Council reserves the right to remove, hide or report content that:

- is abusive, threatening or defamatory;
- contains hate speech or discriminatory language;
- contains misinformation or unlawful material;
- breaches privacy or confidentiality;
- constitutes spam or commercial advertising;
- encourages unlawful activity;
- breaches platform rules.

Users who repeatedly breach standards may be blocked or restricted.

The Council will not normally engage in online arguments or debates.

Where threats, harassment or criminal behaviour occur, the matter may be referred to Sussex Police or relevant authorities.

• 10. Data Protection and Privacy

The Council processes personal data in accordance with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Users must:

- only process personal data where there is a lawful basis;
- avoid publishing personal information without consent unless legally permitted;
- ensure photographs and videos are used lawfully;
- respect individual privacy rights;
- report any data breach immediately to the Clerk.

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Particular care must be taken when publishing:

- photographs of children or vulnerable individuals;
- contact details;
- sensitive personal information;
- recordings of meetings.

Personal data shared via social media may constitute an official Council record.

• 11. Freedom of Information and Record Retention

Information held on Council social media accounts, messaging systems and email accounts may be subject to:

- Freedom of Information Act requests;
- Environmental Information Regulations requests;
- Subject Access Requests.

Relevant communications may therefore need to be retained.

The Clerk will determine appropriate retention arrangements in accordance with the Council's retention schedule.

Councillors should avoid conducting Council business through personal messaging accounts where possible.

• 12. Accessibility

The Council is committed to making digital communications accessible.

Where reasonably practicable, content should:

- use plain language;
- avoid jargon and acronyms;
- include alternative text for images;
- use accessible document formats;
- include captions on videos where appropriate;
- comply with accessibility requirements for public sector websites and mobile applications.

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- **13. Security and Account Management**

Official Council accounts must:

- use strong passwords;
- use multi-factor authentication where available;
- be accessible by more than one authorised officer where practical;
- not share passwords insecurely;
- be updated promptly when administrators change.

The Clerk must be informed immediately of:

- suspected hacking;
- phishing attempts;
- unauthorised access;
- security breaches;
- loss of devices containing Council information.

- **14. Email and Acceptable Use of IT Systems**

14.1 General Principles

Council IT systems are provided primarily for official business purposes.

Limited personal use may be permitted provided it:

- does not interfere with Council business;
- does not incur significant cost;
- does not breach this policy;
- does not expose the Council to risk.

Users must not:

- access unlawful, offensive or inappropriate content;
- download unauthorised software;
- introduce malware or security risks;
- share passwords;
- use Council systems for private commercial activity;
- send offensive or discriminatory emails.

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14.2 Email Use

All councillors should use Council-issued email addresses for Council business wherever possible.

Users must:

- check recipients carefully before sending;
- avoid forwarding confidential information inappropriately;
- be alert to phishing and scam emails;
- use blind copy (BCC) where appropriate;
- retain important Council correspondence.

Emails sent from Council systems may be disclosed under information access legislation.

14.3 Monitoring

The Council reserves the right to monitor use of Council IT systems where lawful and proportionate to:

- maintain security;
- investigate misconduct;
- comply with legal obligations;
- protect Council systems and information.

Monitoring will be conducted in accordance with data protection legislation.

• 15. Remote Meetings, Messaging Applications and Video Conferencing

Where messaging applications or video conferencing platforms are used for Council business:

- professional standards must be maintained;
- confidentiality must be protected;
- records should be retained where appropriate;
- participants must not record meetings without authorisation.

Informal messaging groups must not be used to make Council decisions outside lawful meeting procedures.

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- **16. Media Enquiries**

Official responses to media enquiries relating to Council business should normally be coordinated through the Clerk or an authorised spokesperson.

Councillors speaking in a personal capacity should make this clear.

- **17. Breaches of this Policy**

Failure to comply with this policy may result in:

- removal of access rights;
- internal investigation;
- referral under the Councillor Code of Conduct;
- disciplinary action;
- referral to the police or regulatory authorities.

Serious breaches involving unlawful conduct may result in criminal or civil proceedings.

- **18. Training**

The Council will provide appropriate training and guidance relating to:

- social media use;
- cybersecurity awareness;
- data protection;
- records management;
- acceptable standards of conduct.

- **19. Policy Review**

This policy will be reviewed annually or earlier if required due to:

- changes in legislation;
- operational requirements;
- guidance from NALC, SLCC or the LGA;
- significant incidents or complaints.

Adopted: May 2026

Review Date: May 2028

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• Appendix A – Guidance for Councillors

Councillors should remember that:

- social media posts may be permanent even if deleted;
- screenshots can be shared widely;
- humour and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood;
- private groups are not necessarily private;
- standards expected offline also apply online.

Good practice includes:

- pausing before posting;
- checking facts and sources;
- avoiding late-night responses;
- referring complaints to proper Council processes;
- maintaining respectful dialogue.

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• Appendix B – Example Social Media House Rules

The Council welcomes comments and engagement but reserves the right to remove comments that:

- are abusive, threatening or obscene;
- contain discriminatory language;
- contain personal attacks;
- disclose personal information;
- promote commercial products or services;
- contain misinformation;
- are repetitive or spam;
- encourage unlawful activity.

Repeated breaches may result in blocking or reporting users.

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