

ST ALBANS PARISH COUNCIL

Media Policy

Adopted Date: May 2026

Reviewed May 2026

Next Review due: May 2027

1. Introduction

St Albans Parish Council's relationship with the community is vital to its work and the decisions it takes. An open and constructive dialogue is a key requirement for influencing and developing services, identifying attitudes and measuring satisfaction.

Effective media relations are an important factor in establishing a good relationship between the Parish Council and the community. Since members of the public generally rely on the media for local information and news, it is important for the Parish Council to present information about its activities and aspirations in a consistent way.

St Albans Parish Council recognises that the internet provides a unique opportunity to participate in interactive discussions and share information using a wide variety of social media, such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram. Employees and councillors are likely to use social media in a private capacity outside of work and they may/will also be required to use it in a business capacity as part of their role at the Parish Council.

Employees' and councillors' use of social media in both a personal and business capacity can present risks to our confidential information and reputation and can jeopardise our compliance with legal obligations. To minimise these risks, we expect employees and councillors to adhere to this policy.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all employees and councillors of the Parish Council.

This policy applies to the process of contacting the media and informing the public about the Parish Council's activities, the decisions it takes and the services it provides. It also reviews use of social media for both business and personal purposes whether during office hours or otherwise. It also applies whether the social media is accessed using Council IT facilities, or equipment belonging to employees or councillors.

3. Definitions

The term 'media' encompasses many different means of communicating a message to a wider audience, and includes broadcast media, the Internet, and a wide range of printed media, including local newspapers, magazines, local broadcasters and posters.

Social media is a type of interactive online media that allows parties to communicate instantly with each other, or to share data in a public forum. This includes online social forums such as X, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Linked-In, internet newsgroups and chat rooms. Social media also covers blogs and video and image sharing websites such as YouTube and Flickr.

There are many more examples of social media than can be listed here and this is a constantly changing area. This policy refers to the examples listed and any new social media which is developed in the future.

4. Principles of media engagement

The general principle is that the Parish Council Office will act as the Press Office. Any official contact with the media concerning the Parish Council's policies, decisions and services is to be initiated through this office.

Press releases and statements will be prepared by the clerk in consultation with the chair and other members as required and will normally be restricted to matters that have been debated and agreed by the Parish Council.

Members who are approached by the media should refer to the Council Office to ensure consistency. Members can, as long as they make it clear that it is a personal opinion, state their view on a matter. However, members should take care not to misrepresent and/or bring the Parish Council into disrepute and must bear in mind their responsibilities under the Local Government Code of Conduct. The requirement of the General Data Protection Regulations must be adhered to at all times.

The Local Government Act 1972 requires that agendas, reports and minutes are sent to the media on request and the media are encouraged to attend council meetings and the council should make appropriate space available. The Openness of LG Bodies Regulation 2014 became law on 6 August 2014, allowing filming, photography and/or recording of council proceedings by the public or press. The chairman of the meeting should ask if any person intends to do any of these so that councillors are aware. This should be a constant agenda item on all council or committee meetings. No oral report or running verbal commentary is permitted during the meeting.

5. Using social media sites in the name of St Albans Parish Council.

All posts on behalf of the Parish Council must go via agreed councillors seeking advice from the Clerk as necessary.

Councillors' authority to post will be withdrawn during a defined period before local council elections in order to comply with legislation (Pre-election period).

Councillors should also be aware that the Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature which includes web advertising on their personal social media accounts. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

6. Personal Safety and Privacy

Employees and councillors need to be aware that the information they post on their personal social media profile can make them identifiable to residents and service users, as well as people they know in a private capacity.

Online sites such as Facebook are in the public domain, and personal profile details can be seen by anyone, even if users have their privacy settings on the highest level, if a user's profile is linked to other sites, any changes to their profile will be updated there too.

Employees and councillors who have set their privacy level to the maximum can have their privacy compromised by 'friends' who may not have set their security to the same standard.

7. Key Principles

Employees and councillors must not:

- use the Cllr or Councillor title on personal social media
- present personal opinions as that of the Parish Council
- bring the Parish Council into disrepute or cause embarrassment, including through content posted in a personal capacity
- post content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Parish Council
- disclose commercially sensitive, personal private or confidential information. If you are unsure whether the information you wish to share falls within one of these categories, you should discuss this with the Clerk

- post comments on employees or councillors without their prior approval
- upload, post or forward any content belonging to a third party unless you have that third party's consent. This includes use of an individual's name without written permission to do so; publishing photographs or videos of minors without parental permission
- post any information that infringes copyright of others including any link to a third-party website without checking that any terms and conditions of that website permit you to link to it.
- post, forward or link to controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks, engage in personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications as this may constitute bullying or harassment and will bring the Parish Council into disrepute.
- conduct any online activity that is against regulation or law e.g., may be deemed libellous or that constitutes a criminal offence.

Examples of good practice:

- Be honest and open but be mindful of the impact your contribution might make to people's perceptions of the Parish Council.
- Don't escalate heated discussions, try to be conciliatory, respectful and quote facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations.
- Consider others' privacy and avoid discussing topics that may be inflammatory e.g., politics and religion.
- Offer routes to enable resolution of concerns and complaints e.g., how to report to Gedling Borough Council and other statutory bodies

The above examples are not a definitive list but are examples to illustrate what misuse and good practice may look like.

Councillors must avoid posting views in advance of a decision to be debated by the Council or a Committee meeting, that may constitute predetermination or bias. The Localism Act 2011 states that councillors must not have "had or appeared to have had a closed mind (to any extent) when making the decision".

8. Addressing allegations of misuse

Any employee or councillor who feels that they have been harassed or bullied or are offended by material posted or uploaded by a staff member or councillor onto a social media website should inform the Clerk or Chairperson of the Parish Council who should ensure that all complaints are dealt with consistently and fairly.

For councillors, complaints will be dealt with following the Council's Complaints Policy, with complaints concerning the councillor's conduct being referred to the Gedling Borough Council Monitoring Officer.

For employees, complaints will be dealt with following the Parish Council's Disciplinary Procedure.