



Sedgefield

Town Council

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Passionate about Sedgefield

north east
england

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SEDFIELD TOWN COUNCIL SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1. Introduction:

This Policy represents Sedgefield Town Council's approach to the use of social media which at this time is restricted only to its corporate website and X account (formerly Twitter account).

The use of digital and social media and electronic communication enables Sedgefield Town Council to interact in a way that can improve the communications between the Town Council and the people, businesses and agencies it works with and serves. The Town Council has a corporate website (www.sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk) and X account (@SedgefieldTC). The Town Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. Over time the Town Council may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand its community engagement (See Appendix 1). When these changes occur this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements.

Social media is the term for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. It provides an alternative channel to written correspondence, telephone and face to face conversation to enable the Town Council to inform and respond to questions and queries raised by people who live in, work in and visit the Parish. The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication but to complement. The Town Council's newsletter Sedgefield Extra and its Residents Database will remain the main media for the purpose of communicating information about the Town Council. The website and other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication. Therefore

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existing means of communication should continue with social media being an additional option.

2. Purpose and Scope of Policy:

This policy outlines the standards the Council requires Councillors and Officers to observe when using social media in both a professional capacity and a personal capacity. This policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, the Councillor's Code of Conduct and Staff's Code of Our Values, Behaviours and Conduct. This policy is applicable to all individuals working within the Council as well as both elected and co-opted Councillors in order to protect the reputation, privacy, confidentiality and interests of the Council, its services, employees, partners and community.

3. Definition of Social Media:

Social media are web-based communication tools that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Social media has the following characteristics:

- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of devices – PCs, phones and tablets
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information

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- Provides one to one, one to many and many to many communications
- Allows communication to take place in real time or intermittently

4. Benefits of Using Social Media:

4.1. Communication:

- Directly communicating important and timely messages, news and information, promoting events and improving awareness of services
- Being responsive to requests for information or assistance
- Links to relevant sections of website can be useful
- Ability to give real time updates on emerging situations (ie as they happen)
- Social media offers the opportunity for more relaxed and informal language, but the use of 'text speak' should be avoided or used with caution

4.2. Community Engagement:

- Seeking opinions, stimulating debate and obtaining feedback, and improving democratic engagement
- Connecting with a wider audience, including hard to reach groups using traditional methods of communication
- Sharing knowledge and correcting misconceptions

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4.3. Collaboration:

- Creating and utilising opportunities to work together and share information to benefit the work of individuals, groups and the Council
- Heightened level of interactivity
- Enhanced transparency
- Building a sense of belonging in a neighbourhood

4.4. Cost:

- Low cost in comparison with traditional forms of media

5. Risks of Using Social Media:

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Damage to the reputation of the council
- Social engineering attacks or “phishing”. This is the act of manipulating people into disclosing confidential material or carrying out certain actions. Social engineering is often conducted by individuals fraudulently claiming to be a business or client
- Bullying or witch hunting
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals

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- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world
- Groups on specific themes can be set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of the group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.

Whilst the risks of using social media can be significant these should not be a deterrent from using. People now turn to the web to find out everything from information, entertainment, retail, social interaction, travel and business and expect to use these means to comment and contribute. Similarly, residents will increasingly expect local government to provide its services with the same level of interactivity found elsewhere. There are however some challenges ahead to inform and educate users to interact appropriately on the numerous social media sites. Not engaging with our community is a far greater risk as residents will still use those networks to talk about us whether we are in the conversation or not.

6. Sedgefield Town Council's Chosen Social Media Tools:

Sedgefield Town Council's chosen social media tools are its corporate website and X account. Over time the Town 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 Social Media Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements that it uses to communicate with people who live in, work in and visit the Parish. The Council will always try to use the most effective channel for its communications. We may ask

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those who contact us for their preferred channel of communication when we deal with them.

7. Sedgefield Town Council's Use of Social Media:

Sedgefield Town Council will encourage the use of social media for the purpose of:

- Providing and exchanging information about services
- Supporting local democracy
- Gathering citizen insights and managing citizen relationships
- Promoting cultural events or tourism for the area
- Supporting community cohesion, neighbourliness and resilience
- Creating internal communications, learning and development

At this current time, Sedgefield Town Council will use social media in the following ways:

- Corporate website: The Town Council's www.sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk site is used to provide information about the Council, its structure, its services, introduce its staff and Councillors, provide a depository of agendas, minutes, policies and promote Sedgefield Parish Hall and Sedgefield Youth Club etc.
- X account: The Town Council's @SedgefieldTC is a means of putting out a 280 character limited message in a familiar, friendly and inviting tone, while still being professional and polite. Careful thought needs to be given

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to the message to ensure it fits with the character allowance. Appendix 2 provides further information regarding the tone of such messages and gives examples of information the Town Council can post.

8. Conduct To Observe When Using Social Media:

8.1. Authorised Person(s) For Town Council:

The Council will appoint the Town Clerk as its nominated ‘Moderator’ – who will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content of the Council’s website and X account to ensure compliance with the Social Media Policy. The Projects & Media Co-ordinator has been identified as Deputy Moderator in instances when the Town Clerk is to be absent from work for a period of time. The Moderator will have authority to immediately without notice or comment, remove any posts from the Council’s social media pages if they are deemed to be inflammatory or of a defamatory or libellous nature. It is important to note that currently the ‘Moderator’ will only have access to this role during office working hours. The Town Council will proactively resource and manage its social media presences during business hours.

8.2. Types of Information To Be Shared/Promoted On Social Media:

When you consider using social media the Town Council must consider what it wants to achieve. These considerations include:

- The kind of work you are doing (communication, marketing or developing a project)
- The main medium you are working with (images, text or video)
- What you want to get out of social media – your aims and objectives

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- Which audiences you want to communicate with
- What you want to say
- Why are you using it. For example, are you developing a project, marketing a service, or conducting market or customer research?
- How it will fit into the council's existing web portfolio
- How frequently you are able to update the content

Whilst the Town Council increases its understanding of social media use the key activity for such media will be “core news” eg Mayoral information, community engagement, general information etc all of which will be carried out officially in the name of Sedgefield Town Council:

- This is an important area of the Town Council's engagement practises, especially if we are going to engage more positively with our audience and extend our reach.
- Whatever is published must be of interest, relevant, reliable, consistent, secure and responsible.
- As a general rule – don't rush in. What we are saying will often be permanently published to the world and will often be impossible to take back.
- Think about practicalities – who is going to deliver the reliable and consistent social media content for Sedgefield Town Council, how much time will this take? The most important aspect of social media is momentum and designated publishers should be consistent in the delivery of news articles, upcoming events, community news and controlled publicity of the council's business.
- Be aware of safeguarding issues, it is everyone's business. If anyone has any concerns about other site users, this must be reported to the Town Clerk or Chair of the Council as a matter of urgency.

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8.3. Social Media Etiquette:

Communications from the Town Council must at all times meet the following criteria:

- Be civil, tasteful and relevant
- Do not contain content that is knowingly unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;
- Do not swear
- Not contain content knowingly copied from elsewhere, from which we do not own the copyright;
- Do not post the same message, or very similar messages, more than once (also called “spamming”)
- Do not advertise external products or services
- Do not impersonate someone else
- Not contain any personal information, other than necessary basic contact details;
- Not used for the dissemination of any political advertising.

8.4 Rules of Engagement:

It is important to remember that social media sites are in the public domain and you must ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed. Social media allows people great freedom in how they communicate and express themselves. In order to ensure that all discussions on the Sedgefield Town Council website and/or Twitter account are productive, respectful and consistent, the following guidelines need to be adhered to:

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- Be respectful – set the tone for online conversation by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language, be cordial, honest and professional at all times. Make sure that you respect people’s confidentiality – do not disclose non-public information or the personal information of others. As a general rule, users should not post any content or information they would not be prepared to say to the general public in other Council communications.
- Be credible and consistent – be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications. Correct mistakes, but do not alter previous posts without stating that you have done so.
- Be honest about who you are – it’s important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. Be clear about your own personal role. In social media postings it must be clear in which capacity you are communicating.
- Be responsive – make an effort to share what you know. Offer insights where appropriate and put people in touch with someone who can help if you can’t. Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner, meeting user expectations for the type of social media you are using.
- Be confident – don’t be scared of participating. Follow these rules and seek further guidance if you need it. If you’re about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, pause to think about it. Feel confident in what you say before you say it – and say it as clearly as you can.
- Differing opinions and discussion of diverse ideas are encouraged, but personal attacks on anyone, including Sedgefield Town Council Councillors or Officers, will not be permitted

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- Stay on topic

8.5. Frequency of Social Media Use and Response:

The key benefit of social media usage is the ability to disseminate information very quickly and very directly to an audience, particularly via X. It is therefore important that social media be checked on a regular basis so as to respond to any interaction within a reasonable timescale. In the Town Council's X bio it clearly states "This is the official account of Sedgefield Town Council. Telephone: 01740621273". In addition, the Town Council Office opening times are stated. The Town Council endeavours to make at least a daily post¹, however, frequency will be dictated by circumstances. Weekend posts are filler posts such as meeting reminders, event reminders, service reminders, pictures of the village, a reminder on how to report a certain issue to Durham County Council or the Town Council.

There are a number of different websites and third party apps that allow the Town Council to create and schedule tweets to come out at certain times. This will allow the Council's Moderator to pre-plan the tweets for the week where possible and then schedule them to automatically post throughout the week. This helps with time management and efficiency. When the Council's Moderator is away from work this service means that tweets can still continue as again they can be pre-scheduled. It is important to note that retweets cannot be pre-scheduled. Appendix 3 presents an example week for the Town Council's X account.

¹ When this account was first activated the Town Council's commitment was to make 2 posts per week.

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8.6. Personal Social Media Use:

Individuals can of course use social media personally in their own time. Social media is fun and informative! Councillors and Officers are simply asked to think about how their comments or posts might be regarded by a third party who may associate them with the Town Council. The following guidelines are intended to provide helpful suggestions.

8.6.1 Councillors:

As more and more information becomes available at the press of a button, it is vital that all information is treated sensitively and securely. Town 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 Councillor's Code of Conduct. Councillors should ensure that they are familiar with the guidance that is set out within this policy and that their use of social media does not put the Council's reputation, information and/or security systems at risk. Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Code of Conduct for members and relevant Law. You are acting in your "official capacity" and any conduct may fall within the Code whenever you:

- Conduct the business of the Town Council; or
- Act, claim to act or give the impression you are acting as a representative of the Town Council; or
- Act as a representative of the Town Council.

Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council related material on a personal account or website.

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In any biography where the Councillor is identified as a Councillor, the account should state that the views are those of the Councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council.

It is recommended that in the case of Facebook, Councillors wishing to keep their personal life and role as a Councillor separate create a Facebook page which members of the public can like rather than using their personal profiles.

When commenting on-line on any matter relating to the Council, Councillors should identify themselves as a Councillor (for instance in their profile) and make it clear whether or not they are representing the views of the Council. They must not make anonymous posts nor use a pseudonym when making such comments so as to hide their identity.

Councillors are personally responsible for the content which they publish on any form of social media.

Councillors must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.

Any Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group lead, Town Clerk and/or the police.

When participating in online communication, staff and councillors must:

- Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent

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- Always disclose their identity and affiliation to the council
- Never make false or misleading statements
- Not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. They must protect the good reputation of the council.
- Be mindful of the information posted on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the council.
- Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or 'loud'. Use sentence case format, not capital letters, do not write in red to emphasise points.
- Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
- Do not post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face.
- Never name an individual third party unless you have written permission to do so.
- Seek permission to publish original photographs or video from the persons or organisations in the video or photographs before they are uploaded. You must check that there is parental permission before photos of children are used.
- Respect the privacy of other councillors, staff and residents.
- Never post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations such as libel and copyright.
- Spell and grammar check everything.

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8.6.2. Officers:

When using their own personal social media presence, it is essential that Officers do not disclose any information obtained through their work with Sedgefield Town Council nor express any views which give the impression that they are speaking on behalf of the Council. Officers should not use the Town Council logo on their social media.

8.7. Endorsement:

The Town Council does not endorse any individual or organisation merely by virtue of creating a social media connection, regardless of the terms used by social media providers such as 'follow' or 'like'.

8.8. Elections:

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature – and this includes web advertising. 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. Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.

Political blogs cannot be linked from the Council's website and the Council will not promote Councillors' X accounts during the election purdah period.

8.9. Policy Breach:

Serious breaches of this policy by Officers may be dealt with under the Council's Disciplinary Procedure. The Council may take disciplinary action in respect of unlawful, libellous, harassing, defamatory, abusive,

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threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually orientated or racially offensive comments by the employee. Breach of the policy by Councillors will be dealt with in accordance with the Councillors Code of Conduct. Councillors should bear in mind that inappropriate conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the code does not apply. Failure to comply with this policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer to be dealt with under the Council's Standards Procedures.

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APPENDIX 1 – EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

The types and numbers of social media tools are constantly growing. Examples include the following but is not an exhaustive list:

Facebook: A website and accompanying mobile application on which users create a profile or timeline for themselves where they send and receive requests from “friends” which link their accounts, enabling them to share photos, information and common interests. Accounts can be set to “private” which prevents anyone but a user’s approved friends seeing the content.

Blogs: Short for “weblog”, this is an online diary and can take the form of a personal website created from scratch and designed by the user, or a template hosted on a site such as Blogger, WordPress or Blogs Today. It is effectively an online diary which can be themed or personal, surrounding an individual’s interest or opinions.

X: A microblogging site where users communicate in 280-character statements, including images and links to websites if required. Unlike Facebook (which is essentially private unless you grant access to a “friend”), X accounts are generally public unless restrictions are placed by the user to make them private. Users attract followers, who do not require permission to read a user’s ‘tweets’ (the name of the messages) unless they are blocked. It can be compared with sending a text message to a virtual message board.

Messages can be further shared by ‘re-tweeting’ and public messages exchanged using the “@” symbol and a user’s X name or ‘handle’, and posts on a specific subject are often aggregated through the use of a hashtag, e.g. #Sedgefield.

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YouTube: A video sharing website, where users can view and upload their own videos.

Instagram: An on-line mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social networking service that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and share them either publicly or privately on the app, as well as through a variety of other social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr.

SnapChat: A video messaging application allowing users to take photos, record videos, add text and drawings and send them to a controlled list of recipients. These sent photographs and videos are known as “Snaps”.

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APPENDIX 2 – SEDGEFIELD TOWN COUNCIL USE OF X (formerly Twitter):

Type of tone we want to use:

“Want to be in with a chance of turning on the Sedgefield Christmas lights this year? Find out how: [link to website]”

“Check out our favourite pictures from this year’s #SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY: [link to website]”

This tone:

“Take a look at September’s Monthly Meeting Agenda here: [link to website]”

is friendlier than:

“Please find attached this month’s Monthly Meeting agenda. [link to website]”

This tone:

“Have an issue with unwanted pests? Here’s how to report it [link to DCC]”

is friendlier than:

“Information on how to report pest issues can be found here: [link to DCC]”

Example Posts:

- **Announce council meetings**
 - “September’s Monthly & P&R meetings will be held in the Council Offices on Monday 11th September at the usual time of 7pm. #STC #SedgefieldTC” – 140 characters
- **Weekly reminders about council meetings**
 - “Come and share your views at the Environment Committee meeting on Monday 11th September at 7pm at the Council Office. #STC #SedgefieldTC” – 136 characters
 - “Public participation welcome at the upcoming P&R Committee Meeting on Monday 11th September at the usual time of 7pm. #STC #SedgefieldTC” – 136 characters

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- “Don’t forget, this month’s Environment Committee meeting is on Monday 11th September at 7pm in the Council Offices #STC #SedgefieldTC” – 133 characters
- **Share council meeting agendas**
 - “Take a look at September’s Monthly Meeting agendas here: <http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/category/meeting-minutes/> #STC #SedgefieldTC” – 99 characters (link will automatically shorten)
- **Reminders of how to report problems to DCC**
 - “Have an issue with unwanted pests in your home? Here’s how to report it: <http://www.durham.gov.uk/enquiries> #STC” - 101 characters (link will automatically shorten)
 - “Noticed a faulty street light? Let Durham County Council know here: <http://www.durham.gov.uk/enquiries> #STC” - 96 characters (link will automatically shorten)
- **Reminders of how to contact Sedgefield Town Council**
 - “Interested in having an allotment? Put your name on our waiting list by emailing natalie@sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk #STC #SedgefieldTC” - 136 characters
- **Promotion for Sedgefield Town Council events**
 - “Want to win the honour of turning on the Christmas lights at this year’s #SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY? Here’s how: <http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle> #STC” – 135 characters (link will shorten automatically)
 - “This year’s #SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY will be on Saturday 2nd December 2017. Take a look at the programme here: <http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle> #STC” - 135 characters (link will shorten automatically)
 - “There are still tickets available to see Santa at this year’s #SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY! More info:

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<http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle> #STC” - 123

characters (link will shorten automatically)

- **Follow ups from Sedgefield Town Council events**
 - “Congratulations to all #SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY school competition winners this year! Check out the entries:
<http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle> #STC” - 133
characters (link will shorten automatically)
 - “Check out our favourite pictures from this year’s ‘SEDFIELDSNOWPARTY’:
<http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle> #STC” - 100
characters (link will shorten automatically)
- **Information relevant to residents that would be circulated on residents database**
 - “A number of residents have reported scam ‘Microsoft’ callers. Remember not to give out personal info and report all scams to 101.
#STC” - 134 characters
- **Promote Sedgefield Youth Club**
 - “Sedgefield Youth Club runs every Monday night in Sedgefield Parish Hall! More info: <http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/sedgefield-youth-club> #STC #SedgefieldYouthClub” - 133 characters (link will shorten automatically)
- **Promote Council Office facilities**
 - “Did you know you can get photocopying done at the Council Office? Call 01740 621 273 for more information. #STC #SedgefieldTC” - 125
characters
- **Council Office updates**
 - “The Council Office will be closed Wednesday 23rd August 2017 due to staff training but you can still leave us a message on 01740 621273
#STC” - 140 characters

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- **Parish Hall information and updates**
 - “The Parish Hall’s Main Hall will be closed next week for refurbishment work. More info: <http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle#STC#SedgefieldParishHall>” – 138 characters (link will shorten automatically)
- **Mayoral updates/links to website news articles**
 - “The Mayor spent the day judging scones at the local Taste and See group. Here’s what he had to say (and eat):
<http://sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/linktonewsarticle#STC>” – 138 characters (link will shorten automatically)
- **Promote Sedgefield Extra**
- **Planning updates/weekly planning link (such as in the Round-Up)**
- **Retweet important, relevant messages from @SedgefieldNPT (Sedgefield Neighbourhood Policing Team) and @DurhamPolice (Durham Constabulary)**
- **Retweet important, relevant messages from @DurhamCouncil (Durham County Council)**
- **Retweeting local residents’ status/photo/video related to us** – If we see a tweet by a twitter user than relates to the village/council in some way and is deemed appropriate (e.g. no bad language) we can retweet it so it shows up on our feed. This could be someone’s positive opinion or a great picture of a council event. The original tweet cannot be edited so anything we retweet on to our timeline cannot be edited by the original tweeter and will remain ‘appropriate.’ If the original tweet is deleted it will just say something like “This tweet is no longer available” or “This media is no longer available” and we can delete our retweet from our twitter feed.

Possible posts to encourage Community Engagement:

- Surveys
- Photos of the village, our buildings, land, flowers etc.

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7.0.	11.11.2024	Jane Ayre, Town Clerk	October 2025

- Photo competitions (e.g. best picture of the Snow Party gets retweeted or wins a small prize collectable from the office)

Matters not to post:

- Promote local businesses, organisations or events by tweeting or retweeting (@SedgefieldNews covers this) and like the Extra, we should keep Twitter to council news/info and extensions of that such as sharing DCC and police messages with residents.
- Promote individual Parish Hall bookings
- Promote or post personal content or anything not related to or relevant to Sedgefield Town Council including likes, retweets or follows that aren't relevant to the council

An annual X schedule is prepared and tweets scheduled by the Town Clerk. This is then interspersed with current news items and where possible accompanying images. The Town Clerk has responsibility for writing and issuing tweets.

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