

Guidance on the use of Email and Social Media. Laverstock and Ford Parish Council.

Social media is a collective term used to describe easy ways to create and publish on the internet. People generally use the term to describe how organisations and individuals share content – text, video and pictures – and create conversations on the web.

It has grown substantially over recent years as a means of communicating and sharing information. Popular sites include [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#), [Blogger](#), [WordPress](#) and [YouTube](#)

The important thing to remember about social media is that it is social. It is about communication.

The use of social media by the Council and its Councillors is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Parish Council Newsletter will remain the main media for communicating information about the Parish Council.

1. Maintaining good ‘netiquette’

Councillors, just like anyone, should take due regard of internet security and to ensure that communications remain proper and appropriate; the following practical points may assist:

1.2 Make your commenting policy clear

You will need to take note of the comments that other people make on your site. It may be a fine line to tread, but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand on your site then it can put off other members of your community, and you may even be called to account under the Code of Conduct for Councillors. For blogs, the easiest way to handle this is to moderate comments and to state clearly on your site that you’re doing so and reasons why comments may be rejected. For Facebook or other social networks, including multi-media sites like YouTube and Flickr where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to regularly check on messages (you can be notified by email) or disable message posting.

1.3 Allow disagreement

Some comments may not accord with your views, but on the other hand deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will backfire. You cannot stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, and then linking back to your site and saying you are gagging those who disagree with you.

1.4 Think before you publish

Words cannot be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off blog post or tweet, it will probably have already been read and will be referenced or duplicated in places on the web beyond your reach.

1.5 “Following” and “friending”

Some of the terminologies in social media, like ‘following’ or ‘friending’ can imply an intimacy that’s not there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Experienced internet users are used to this, but some members of the public may feel uneasy when their 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. Bloggers are, however, almost invariably happy for you to link to them.

You must think carefully about who you request to be ‘friends’ with or accept ‘friend’ requests from. Requesting or accepting, for example, an officer of the Authority as a ‘friend’ on a social network site must not compromise the professional and impartial relationship between officers and elected members. Generally, this should be avoided.

1.6 If you make a mistake

Social media is transparent; the best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which is not 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 it’s much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

1.7 Avoid the difficult users

As you begin to use social media, you’ll find some argumentative characters out there. Don’t get bogged down. You don’t have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary.

2. Legal Considerations

In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else (see below), but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using a Councillor’s website for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning, licensing and other quasi-judicial matters relating to the Parish Council.

a) 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.

b) 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.

c) Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission. More information is available from the authority's Data Protection Guide for Councillors.

d) Obscene material

It goes without saying that you should avoid publishing anything in your blog that people would consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

e) Bullying and Discriminatory comments

Behaving in a discriminatory, bullying or harassing way towards any individual including making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality), disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief or age via social media by posting images or links or comments could, in certain circumstances, result in criminal sanction.

While the above list is not exhaustive it does highlight some of the more obvious issues. Almost these pitfalls can be avoided if your online content is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

3. The Councillors' Code of Conduct

It is worth pointing out that Councillors can have 'blurred identities' when they have a social media account where they comment both as a councillor and as a private individual.

For example, you may have a Facebook account where you've posted about a great night out (in your personal/private capacity) and another time explained the Parish Council's position on an action (in your councillor capacity). It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor, but it could be less clear to others.

Such blurred identities might, for example, have implications where your views are taken as those of the Council's rather than your opinion. So, it is important to be clear in your social media accounts/profiles, then you can be confident as to what you can and cannot 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 Councillors' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate to the public. As explained above there is a difference between communicating on behalf of the Council, for example blogging as an elected 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 for Councillors is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a councillor, and that is the case whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

One way to separate your personal/private business from your activities as a councillor is to have two separate accounts: one for personal/private business and the other for councillor activities. The latter account should have the title of Councillor in the profile name to clearly identify the role you are undertaking when using that account. This separation of accounts will assist in managing lists of friends and the content of any tweets/post etc.

Aspects of the Councillors' Code of Conduct will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake. Councillors should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- Treating others with respect. Avoid personal attacks and any disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- Refraining from publishing anything you have received in confidence.
- Ensuring you do not bring the Council or your councillor role into disrepute.

4 General Guidance on use of emails

Email users are advised to be aware of the following:

- Messages sent to groups of people must be relevant to all concerned.
- Don't use the 'reply to all' button unnecessarily,
- Think carefully before saying something in a message. If it could be taken in two ways, try rephrasing it in a less ambiguous way. When reading a message, try to consider it carefully rather than jumping to a conclusion.
- Messages sent by email may not be seen by the recipient. If the message is extremely urgent, an alternative method of contact should be used.
- Whilst open discussion of forthcoming Council discussions is welcome aggressive lobbying is not appropriate. The council meeting is the place to contribute to discussions and where decisions of the Parish Council are made.

- The Council cannot be held responsible for damages, losses, expenses or claims that may be incurred by a user of this facility.

5. Elections – Purdah

This guidance applies to your use of social media during the “purdah” period before elections. Purdah does not affect a member’s ability to use social media in the normal responsible way **as a private individual only and provided you are not using Council resources to do so** where you wish to perhaps promote an election candidate or political party.

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