



LINGFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

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Social Media Policy

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Purpose of Policy

Social media provides Lingfield Parish Council with the opportunity to communicate to a wide audience promptly on a range of subjects relating to its activities including providing updates, news, and information. It also provides an opportunity to communicate with the younger age group, the business community and hopefully the harder to reach groups.

The Council will make use of social media tools to quickly distribute information but will carefully control its use in order to minimise the risks and preserve the Council's integrity.

This Policy provides a structured approach to using social media and to ensure that its use is effective and lawful and that it does not compromise either the Council's integrity or its information or computer systems and networks. The Policy provides guidelines for Councillors and staff, and sits within the parameters already set out in the Council's Code of Conduct.

Users must ensure they use social media sensibly and responsibly and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

Social media may be used to:

- post agendas, minutes and dates of meetings;
- advertise events and activities;
- post good news stories and linked websites or press pages;
- advertise vacancies for both Councillors and staff;
- share information from partners i.e. Tandridge District Council, Surrey County Council and Police etc.;
- announce new information;
- post or share information from other Parish related community groups e.g. schools, sports clubs and community groups; and
- refer resident queries to the Clerk and all other Councillors.

Emails may be used to distribute information about Council business. Where emails are used:

- Any matters to do with the Council will be transacted using the designated Parish Councillor email and all matters relating to the whole Council should be copied into all Parish Councillors, including all replies;
- Only in exceptional circumstances, or with specific permission from the Chair, should a Parish Councillor be using their personal email address for Council correspondence;
- Emails should not be forwarded without the author's permission and emails containing private information relating to third parties should not be forwarded outside of the LPC system, without that third parties' permission.

Aims

The aim of the Policy is to set out a code of practice to provide guidance to staff and Councillors in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media. Social media is a collective term used to describe methods of publishing on the internet. The Policy covers all forms of social media and social networking sites which include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Parish Council website;
- Parish Council emails;
- Facebook and other social networking sites;
- Twitter and other micro blogging sites;
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites;
- LinkedIn; and
- blogs and discussion forums.

The principles of the Policy apply to all Parish Councillors and the Clerk. It is also intended to be used as guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council.

The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The Parish Council's monthly meetings and the website will remain the main media for the purpose of communicating information about the Parish Council. Other forms of social media will be used to enhance communication. Therefore, existing means of communication should continue with social media being an additional option.

This Policy supplements, and should be read in conjunction with, all other policies and procedures adopted by LPC. The current Code of Conduct applies to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Over time LPC may add to the channels of communication that it uses as it seeks to improve and expand the services that the Council delivers. When these changes occur, this Policy will be updated to reflect the new arrangements. This Policy may be amended at any time.

Responsibilities

The Clerk is the designated 'Council' owner of LPC's social media channels and will be responsible for establishing and administrating them. Councillors officially appointed by the Council may assist the Clerk to disseminate information. However, all councillors must ensure that they follow this Policy. No account details may be changed without the permission of the Clerk.

Lingfield Parish Council posts or comments on posts should only be made using the established Council social media accounts.

The Parish Clerk may initiate posts or comments without prior approval for the purpose of circulating or responding with public domain information, public service notices and details from approved Parish Council minutes or on instructions from a full Council meeting.

Guidance for Councillors

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way as they do to other written or verbal communications. Online content should be accurate, objective, balanced and informative.

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences and there are some additional duties around using websites for electoral campaigning. Extra care should also be taken when writing on planning matters.

Councillors should not use their own personal social media accounts when posting or commenting on posts with regards to Lingfield Parish Council business or anything that may be construed as such, save where it is determined that there is a requirement for a prompt response to factually incorrect information provided that

any such response is factually accurate, does not adversely affect the Council or its business, is not damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility and does not otherwise violate any Council policies.

Individual Parish Councillors are responsible for what they post. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published e-mail address which is used for Council business. Councillors are strongly advised to have separate Council and personal email addresses and keep Council business only to their Council email addresses.

Councillors using their own social media accounts, or any other form of communication, for community or other purposes do so as private individuals and should not use any privileged material gained from their position as a Parish Councillor.

Councillors wishing to utilise a Parish Council social media account should email the Parish Clerk with the proposed content and posting instructions with a copy to the Chairman. Once approved by the Chairman, the Parish Clerk will make the post or comment as instructed. **(N.B. where possible posts should cross reference to the Parish Council website and provide the appropriate link).**

Code of Practice

When using social media, Parish Councillors and Council staff must be mindful of the information they post in both a personal and Council capacity and keep the tone of any comments respectful and informative.

The Parish Council has a professional image to uphold and how Councillors conduct themselves, whether personally or as a Councillor online, impacts this image.

Where an individual person believes that a Councillor has breached this policy, the appropriate route to complain is via the Monitoring Officer at Tandridge District Council. Where an individual person believes that a member of Council staff has breached this policy, the appropriate route to complain is through the Chair of the Parish Council.

Guidance when using social media (including email)

All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and it should be ensured that security settings are in place. The descriptions and contact details used on any Councillor profiles should be kept up to date. When participating in any online communication Councillors should:

- be responsible and respectful, ensuring posts are positive, informative and balanced;
- respect the privacy of other Councillors, Council staff and residents;
- keep the tone of their comments respectful and informative. The tone should not be condescending or "loud";
- always disclose their identity and affiliation to the Parish Council and never hide their identity by using false names or pseudonyms;
- use sentence case format and should not use capital letters or write in red to emphasis points. "Bold" or "italics" may be used to emphasise key words if required; and
- spell and grammar check all communications, prior to posting, and correct any factual or typographical errors promptly.

Parish Councillors and staff must not:

- present personal opinions as that of Lingfield Parish Council. If a Councillor or member of staff blogs, tweets, or communicates online personally, or in a capacity other than that of Parish Councillor, they must not claim to act or give the impression that they are acting as a representative of LPC;
- express any views which may have a Party-political bias;
- present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment to the Council; Councillors
- and Council staff must protect the good reputation of the Council;

- make false or misleading statements;
- post personal or political content or content that is contrary to the democratic decisions of the Council;
- post controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks;
- use an individual's name and/or address in social media communication or post information about an individual unless given written permission by the individual to do so;
- make derogatory, defamatory, discriminatory or offensive comments about any person, including Council staff, Councillors, the Council or about the people, businesses and agencies that the Council works with and serves;
- engage in personal attacks, online fights, hostile communications or in any way allow their interaction on websites or blogs to damage their working relationships with others;
- publish photographs or videos of minors without parental permission;
- post any information that infringes the copyright of others;
- post any information that may be deemed libel (publishing untrue statements about a person which is damaging to their reputation is libel and can result in a court action);
- post online activity that constitutes bullying or harassment;
- block people without a very good reason. Councillors can block or report people on social media sites if they are not following the rules or are being offensive but this ability should be used sparingly;
- post offensive language relating, in particular, to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief;
- conduct any online activity that violates laws, regulations or that constitutes a criminal offence; and/or
- bring the Council into disrepute, including through content posted in a personal or any other capacity.

Councillors' views posted, in any capacity, in advance of matters to be debated by the Council at a Council or committee meeting may constitute predisposition, predetermination or bias and as such may require the individual to declare an interest at Council meetings.

Non-compliance and misuse of social media content will not be tolerated and will be deemed contrary to this and other Parish Council policies and may be reported to the Monitoring Officer.

Anyone with concerns regarding content placed on social media sites that denigrate Parish Councillors, Council staff or residents should, in the first instance, report such content to the Clerk of the Council and ideally include a screenshot of the offending content.

Social media during meetings

The Council encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of the Parish Council's news and information and the use of social media can help with this. Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings and should not interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Electronic devices should be switched to "silent" mode during meetings;
- Councillors' tweets / blogs during Council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting – tweeting / blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting.

Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members, online or otherwise. Residents expect debate and to be informed about Council business, not to witness disagreements between Council members which are irrelevant to the agenda item, or to see that repeated online at the time or afterwards;

The use of social media generally

- Residents and anyone else wishing to make contact with the Council will be made aware that the preferred form of communication with the council in the first instance is to the Clerk, by email, by phone, by post or in person.
- Residents and Councillors should note that not all communication requires a response;
- It should be noted that it will not always be possible to provide an “immediate” response to communications if the communication is such that it is appropriate that it be discussed by the full Council prior to responding;
- The Parish Clerk will be responsible for all final published responses having referred to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman where necessary;
- If a matter needs further consideration it may be raised as a full agenda item for discussion at the next appropriate meeting. Again, the poster shall be informed, via the page or direct message, that this is the case;
- If the Clerk feels unable to answer a post e.g. one of a contentious nature, this shall be referred to the Chairman or Vice-Chairman. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with them directly;
- Some communications from residents and other third parties may be required to be discussed at a Parish Council meeting. When this is necessary the item will be placed on the next available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting;
- Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns or questions regarding content placed on social media sites should report them directly to the Clerk of the Council. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.
- The Clerk, or anyone appointed by the Clerk, reserves the right to remove offensive comments.

8 Guidance for anyone wanting to contact the Council

The preferred form of communication with the Council is, in the first instance, to contact the Clerk by email, phone, post or in person.

Anyone making comments on Parish Council social media posts should expect that it may not be necessary or possible to make any response.

Social media sites are not monitored 24/7 and LPC will not always be able to reply individually to all messages or comments received. However, we will endeavour to ensure that any emerging themes or helpful suggestions are passed to the relevant people.

Sending a message/post via Facebook will not be considered as contacting the Council for official purposes and we will not be obliged to monitor or respond to requests for information through the Facebook channel or other social media sites. Instead, please contact the Clerk directly via email or in person at the Council office. Please do not include personal/private information in your Facebook posts/messages to the Council.

Review of policy

The Policy will be reviewed at least once per Council term.