

Social Media Policy

The aim of this Policy is to set out a Code of Practice to provide guidance to Thorney Parish Council staff and Councillors in the use of online communications, collectively referred to as social media.

Social media is a 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):

- Facebook
- Messenger
- Discussion forums
- Parish Council emails
- Parish Council websites and any other websites used by the Parish Council for communication.

Facebook and Messenger will be used as a means of communicating with the general public and to support any website information.

Emails will be used to distribute information of Parish Council/City Council business.

TPC has its own website which will be included in this policy.

The Social Media Policy will be reviewed annually.

Who does it apply to?

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

The Policy does not seek to regulate Parish Councillors and staff in their private capacity.

Existing forms of communication and policies

The use of social media does not replace existing forms of communication. The website and other forms of social media are used to enhance communication. Therefore, existing means of

communication should continue with social media supporting those other methods.

The policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which also need to be taken into consideration when participating in social media.

Management of Social Media

1. Each year the Parish Council will appoint at least two nominated members of the Parish Council as moderators. They will be responsible for posting and monitoring of all content on Thorney Parish Council Social Media sites ensuring it complies with the Social Media Policy. The moderators have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be defamatory, libellous in nature or are otherwise deemed to be inappropriate. Such posts will be reported to the Parish Council Clerk and may also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) and Police.
2. The Parish Council will appoint a nominated “Webmaster” to maintain and update any Parish Council Website and to liaise with hosts of other websites which the Parish Council uses for communication.
3. The Parish Council’s use of Social Media may include;
 - a. **Post minutes** and dates of meetings
 - b. **Advertise events and activities**
 - c. **Announce new information**
 - d. Share/post good news stories
 - e. Provide links to other websites (including those of the City and Parish Councils)
 - f. Advertise staff vacancies and vacancies on the Parish Council
 - g. ‘Share’ information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.
 - h. Post or share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools sports clubs and community groups
 - i. **Refer resident queries to the clerk and all other Parish Councillors**
 - j. Notification of planning applications

- k. Notification of planning application approvals and refusals
 - l. Collate and respond to issues raised on social media by residents
4. All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and the Thorney Parish Council must ensure that the security settings are in place

Participating in Social Media

When participating in any form of Social Media whether using your personal account, your published Parish Council account, as a moderator or in a private or an official capacity; the following standards should be adhered to:

- a. Be responsible and respectful
- b. Be direct, informative, brief and transparent
- c. When posting from a personal account always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council.
- d. Never make false or misleading statements.
- e. Parish Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment.
- f. All Parish Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites
- g. Make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Parish Council or bring the Parish Council into disrepute or are contrary to the Parish Council's Code of Conduct or any other policies.
- h. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks.
- i. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age or religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
- j. Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications
- k. Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
- l. Permission to publish photographs or videos on social media sites should be sought from the persons or organisations in the video or photograph before being uploaded.
- m. Respect the privacy of other Parish Councillors and residents.
- n. Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, *see below libel and copyright.*

- o. At no time should information discussed in confidence be used or discussed on social media.
- p. Thorney Parish Council Social Media will not be used for the dissemination of political advertising.
- q. Refrain from using the Parish Council's Social Media for commercial purposes, advertising or selling products and/or services.

Guidance for Parish Councillors using the Parish Council's Social Media Presence

Whether posting on the Parish Council's behalf or posting their own personal views on an issue, Parish Councillors must accept the following responsibilities:

- a. Individual Parish Councillors may post their own personal views but, must be aware that they are responsible for what they post from their own accounts and/or email addresses.
- b. Parish Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published email address which is used for Parish Council business.
- c. Councillors are strongly advised to have separate Parish Council and personal email addresses and adhere to The Members' Code of Conduct, see Guidance for Councillors at the end of this document.
- d. When posting from a personal account always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council.
- e. Make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Parish Council or bring the Parish Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Parish Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
- f. Where moderators are posting words provided by other Parish Councillors, the responsibility for the content lies with the creator not the moderator.

Authorisation for new posts

Before a new post from Thorney Parish Council can be made public it needs to go through the proper channels. This section states what level of involvement from the whole or part of the Parish Council is required for various categories of post:

- a. General announcements will be made following previous discussion at TPC meetings. Wording will be approved by Chair/Clerk at least, with additional levels of approval agreed at the meeting as appropriate – Councillors and Moderators can draft wording and publication will be carried out by moderators once approved.
- b. Meetings and events – moderators will post, no approval needed as dates already approved
- c. Approved minutes to be posted by moderators (after approval in TPC meeting)
- d. Successes and Achievements - wording to be approved by majority of TPC either at meetings or via email approval if we want to post it before the next TPC meeting
- e. Vacancies – wording approved by Chair/Clerk to be posted by moderators/admins
- f. Police reports, ecops info, library info and PCC info to be posted as and when received – no approval needed – moderators/admins to post
- g. Other community groups – sharing information from other community groups with approval from majority of TPC – moderators to share info
- h. Resident queries/concerns – moderators/admins will post standard response to say query/concern has been forwarded to Parish Clerk, immediate response may not be possible if discussion at next meeting is required. Parish Clerk will get back to them as soon as possible.
- i. Planning applications – notify public that we have received an application in the Parish and inform them that they can make comments on PCC website. applies to all applications – with approval from TPC, moderators will post brief details
- j. Planning applications accepted/refused – dependent on confidentiality – approval from TPC with Planning sub group to provide wording for moderators to post
- k. Factual responses where information can be provided e.g. questions to with dates of meetings, venues and so on – no approval needed – wording by moderators/admins
- l. Factual responses where discussions are ongoing e.g. Bedford Hall, Library, Social Centre, pavilion, park – standard response ‘Thank you for your query. TPC cannot comment on this as it is not managed by TPC. However, TPC will forward this query to our City Councillors to take up on your behalf. Responses will come from the City Councillors not from TPC. Thank you and please feel free to contact us with any concerns or questions in the future.’

- m. Standard holding response where suggestions or concerns need to be discussed at the next TPC meeting. 'Thank you for contacting us. We will need to discuss this at our next meeting. We will get back to you on this but please be aware it will not be until after (date of next meeting). In the meantime please feel free to contact us with any concerns or questions in the future or email the Parish Clerk on (email address)'
- n. Standard response where TPC is aware of the issue or is awaiting responses from others 'Thank you for contacting us. We are aware of (issue) and we are currently awaiting a response from (who). Once we have received this response we will be able to share this with you. In the meantime please feel free to contact us with any concerns or questions in the future or email the Parish Clerk on (email address).'

Responding to posts from the general public

- a. Residents and Parish Councillors should note that not all communication requires a response.
 - i.* There may not be immediate responses to communications as they may need to be discussed by the Parish Clerk **and all responses except those requiring factual responses, like dates and venues of meetings will be agreed by the Parish Council.**
 - ii.* The Parish Clerk and the moderators will be responsible for all final published responses.
 - iii.* If a matter needs further consideration it may be raised at either the open forum or as a full agenda item for consideration by a quorum of Parish Councillors. Again, the poster should be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case.
 - iv.* If the moderator feels unable to answer a post for example, of a contentious nature, this will be referred to the Parish Clerk. The poster will be informed by way of response to this fact and also be invited to correspond with the Parish Clerk directly.
 - v.* Some communication 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 agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.

- b. The nominated moderator(s) shall remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libellous or defamatory information, without further comment or notification.
 - i. Spell and grammar check everything.
 - ii. Correct any errors promptly.

- c. Parish Councillors or parishioners who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Parish Clerk. Misuse of such sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

Date of Approval by Parish Council:

Review date:

End of Policy

Additional information (IDeA) 2010 – IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO SUPPORT THE POLICY

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.

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.

Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

Bias and Pre-Determination

Section 25 (2) of the Localism Act 2011 states that a member or co-opted member of a local authority cannot be taken to have had or to appear to do anything that directly or indirectly indicates that they have had a closed mind when making decisions of the relevant authority otherwise the validity of the decision may be called into question.

Obscene Material

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral Periods and Purdah

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And 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

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent/parish-and-community-council-elections-in-england-and-wales>

The Parish Council's Legal Position

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a Parish Councillor, promote an individual Parish Councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the Parish Council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Member's Code of Conduct - Guidance for Councillors

N.B. The Localism Act 2011 placed a general obligation to "promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority".

Parish Councillors

*Parish Councillors can have 'blurred identities, you may have a social media account where you comment both as a Parish Councillor and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a Parish Councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation rather than your personal opinion. There is need to get social media accounts/profiles clear, to be confident as to what you can and can't 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 Members' Code of Conduct. Parish Councillors may be communicating politically. **There is a difference between communication on behalf of the parish Council, for example blogging as a Parish 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 is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a Parish Councillor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so. This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or Facebook profile.*

There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgement than a hard and fast line. For example, A Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a Parish Councillor., the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most Parish Councillors are using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so

engaging the code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. Since the judgement of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Parish Councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role. It is worth noting that web links to official Parish Council websites may give or reinforce the impression that you are representing the Parish Council. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Parish Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity. Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

Some of the terminology 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. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a frisson of unease when their Parish Council, local Police service or Parish Councillor begins following them on Twitter or Facebook before establishing some sort of online relationship. Some Parish 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. And bloggers are almost invariably happy for you to link to them, so you don't need to ask first in this instance. Social media is transparent. The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't 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 is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

Avoid the Trolls

A troll is a person that posts inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic messages in an online community with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.

References

The Improvement and Development agency (IDeA) 2010. Connected councillors a guide to using social media to support local leadership.

IDeA March 2010

'Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' LGA Connected Councillors Social Media Handbook,

Cheshire East Council Jaffe PR Social Media Policy Template,

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