



FOUR MARKS PARISH COUNCIL COMMUNICATION AND 'SOCIAL MEDIA' POLICY

Four Mark Parish Council's ('the Council') Communication and 'Social Media' Policy is based upon three key principles which enable the Council to work more effectively. These are:

Communication – directly communicate important and timely messages, news, and information, promote events, and improve awareness of services by providing direct digital access to them.

Engagement – seek opinions, share conversations, and better engage with residents, helping to improve residents' knowledge and correct misconceptions.

Collaboration – find more efficient ways of working together and sharing information which can change or enhance the perception of the Council and that of specific service areas or projects

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to define the roles and responsibilities within the Council for interacting with the media and with the public through social media channels.

1.2 It is not the intention of this policy to curb freedom of speech, rather, the intention is to establish a framework for achieving an effective working relationship with both the public and the media. The Council welcomes the opportunity to talk with media channels and, through them, to debate issues in the public arena.

KEYS AIMS

2.1 The Council is accountable to the local community for its actions, and this can only be achieved through effective two-way communications. The media – press, radio, TV, internet – are crucially important in conveying information to the community so the Council must maintain positive, constructive media relations and work with them to increase public awareness of the services and facilities provided by the Council and to explain the reasons for certain policies and priorities.

2.2 The media themselves have a vital role to play on behalf of the local community in holding the Council to account for its policies and actions and have access to background information to assist them in this role. To balance this, the Council will defend itself from any unfounded criticism and will ensure that the public are properly informed of all the relevant facts using other channels of communication if necessary.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The law governing communications in local authorities can be found in the Local Government Acts 1986 and 1988. The Council must also have regard to the government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Some aspects of the Code are relevant to this policy: -

- "Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims [and the provision of services] should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation or both."
- "Publicity touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the Council... should be handled with particular care. Issues

must be presented clearly, fairly, and as simply as possible, although Councils should not oversimplify facts, issues, or arguments.”

- “Publicity should not attack, nor appear to undermine, generally accepted moral standards.”
- “... local authorities... should not use public funds to mount publicity campaigns whose primary purpose is to persuade the public to hold a particular view on a question of policy.”

3.2 Officers and Councillors should always have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in all their dealings with the media.

3.3 Confidential documents, exempt Minutes, reports, papers, and private correspondence should not be leaked to media channels. If such leaks do occur, an investigation will take place to establish who was responsible and take appropriate action.

3.4 There are several personal privacy issues for officers and Councillors that must be handled carefully and sensitively. These include the release of personal information, such as home address, private e-mail address and telephone numbers (although Councillor contact details are in the public domain), annual leave, disciplinary procedures and long-term sickness absences that are affecting service provision. In all these and similar situations, advice must be taken from the Executive Officer/Clerk before any response is made to the media.

3.5 It is illegal to use graphics or photographs without permission. Ensure that anyone giving permission to use an image is the original copyright owner and check the licensing agreement of photographs in any existing archives before use. Do not take or use any photographs of children who appear to be under the age of 18 without permission from a parent or guardian. Permission is non-transferable from a third party, such as a school.

CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA

4.1 When responding to approaches from the media, the Executive Officer/Clerk is usually the main contact with permission to speak to the media. The Chairman and Chairmen of Committees, by the nature of their position, are also authorised contacts with the media in consultation with the Executive Officer.

4.2 Statements made by the Chairman or Chairmen of Committees must reflect the Council’s opinion and set policies to ensure that the Council appears of one opinion which represents the decisions made as Minuted.

4.3 Councillors who are not Committee chairs shall not communicate with the media as they may not be in possession of all the facts. If other Councillors are contacted directly by the media for comment, they should respond with a holding action until the Executive Officer/Clerk has been contacted before responding to the request, even if pressed. If the Executive Officer/Clerk is not available, then the Chairman should be contacted. Only an agreed statement should be communicated to the media.

4.4 Other Councillors can talk to the media but must ensure that it is made clear that the opinions given were their own and not necessarily those of the Council, preferably by confirming with the Executive Officer/Clerk beforehand.

4.5 Caution should be exercised when submitting letters to the editor for publication in newspapers. There are occasions when it is appropriate for the Council to submit a letter, for example to explain important policies or to correct factual errors in letters submitted by other correspondents. However, such letters should be kept brief and balanced in tone and correspondence should not be drawn out over several weeks.

4.6 Letters representing the views of the Council should only be submitted by the Chairman, Chairmen of Committees, or the Executive Officer/Clerk.

4.7 Councillors are strongly encouraged not to use the letters page within the Local Press as a means of expressing their personal views. However, should individual Councillors wish to submit a letter, it should be checked by the Executive Officer/Clerk prior to submission, if not, it must be made clear that the letter is written as a member of the public, is their own opinion, and not that of the Council.

4.8 At all times consideration should be given as to how the correspondence may affect the reputation of the Council.

ATTENDANCE OF MEDIA AT COUNCIL OR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

5.1 The media are encouraged to attend Council and Committee meetings and seating and workspace will be made available.

5.2 Filming or taping of Council or Committee proceedings by the media is permitted in accordance with Standing Orders and the Council Protocol on the Recording of Meetings.

ELECTIONS

6.1 The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity contains guidance for providing publicity for Councillors and for publicity around elections. The code makes it clear that Council resources should not be used on publicising individual Councillors unless it is relevant to the position they hold in the Council. These extracts from the Code illustrate the main points: -

- “Publicity about individual Councillors may include the contact details, the positions they hold in the Council (for example, Chairman or Chairman of a committee), and their responsibilities. Publicity may also include information about individual Councillors’ proposals, decisions, and recommendations only where this is relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council. All such publicity should be objective and explanatory, and personalisation of issues or personal images making should be avoided.”

- “Publicity should not be, or liable to misrepresentation as being, party political. Whilst it may be appropriate to describe policies put forward by an individual Councillor which are relevant to their position and responsibilities within the Council, and to put forward their justification in defence of them, this should not be done in party political terms, using political slogans, expressly advocating policies of those of a particular party or directly attacking policies and opinions of other parties, groups, or individuals.”

- “The period between the notice of an election and the election itself should preclude proactive publicity in all its forms of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

6.2 In line with practice elsewhere in the country, the Council will not quote any Councillor in a news release or involve them in proactive publicity events during the election period, regardless of whether they are standing for election. The only exception to this (as laid down in the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity) is during an emergency or where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside the control of the Council. In this situation, Councillors holding key civic positions should be able to comment.

PRESS RELEASES

7.1 The purpose of a press release is to make the media aware of a potential story, to provide important public information or to explain the Council’s position on a particular issue. It is the responsibility of all officers and Councillors to look for opportunities where the issuing of a press release may be beneficial.

7.2 All press releases are to be factual, non-political, not written to cause offence and must be in accordance with Council policy.

7.3 All press releases are to be issued by the Executive Officer/Clerk (but may be drafted by other officers, subject to approval) in order to ensure that the principles outlined in section three (Legal Framework) are adhered to, that there is consistency of style across the Council and that the use of the press release can be monitored, having consulted with the Chairman or Chairman of the relevant committee on the proposed wording as appropriate.

SOCIAL MEDIA

8.1 The definition of social media continues to evolve as platforms and technologies develop.

Overall, it refers to any web-based practices which can be used to share content. This policy applies to the use of all social media by any Councillors and employees of the Council.

8.2 It is a key communications tool for the Council and highlights a commitment to openness and transparency.

8.3 Anything written on the Council's social media platforms reflect on the organisation, but given the relaxed style of social media, it is important not to appear overly formal.

8.4 The Executive Officer/Clerk and Deputy Clerk/Assistant are designated as the administrators of the Council's Social Media sites and all postings should be directed as per Section 4, contact with the Media. Any postings should only reflect information of content which it would be acceptable to publish to the public in other Council communications.

8.5 The Council is under no obligation to moderate posts or comments made by the public on its social media channels. However, the Council would not want to be seen to be endorsing comments which are defamatory, false, or misleading; insulting, threatening or abusive; obscene or of a sexual nature; offensive, racist, sexist, homophobic or discriminatory against religions or other groups; promoting illegal activity; or intended to deceive. Such posts to the Council's Social Media pages will be removed.

8.6 Occasional negative posts cannot be avoided, but how they are dealt with has implications for the Council's reputation. They should not be ignored, although sometimes no answer is required if it is a rhetorical question, a repetition of an earlier posting, or a post designed to provoke.

8.7 As posts are public it is better to answer them in public, although occasionally it may help to take them onto a private channel.

8.8 While the private accounts of authority employees and Councillors are their own business, it is still possible for the content posted on them to affect their professional standing and/or that of the Council. To mitigate this risk Councillors/Officers may not wish to include any reference to, or post comments about, the Council, job roles, colleagues, or partner organisations. If references to employment or connection with the Council are made on a personal social media profile, please ensure the following actions:

- Declare somewhere on your page or biography that the views expressed are yours alone
- Do not bring the authority into disrepute
- Do not reveal any potentially confidential or sensitive information about the authority that you may have come across in your work or role for the Council.
- Do not use any Council-owned images or logos
- Do not include contact details or photographs of service users or staff.
- Do not make offensive comments about the authority, Councillors, officers, colleagues, or Councillors of the public as this is a disciplinary offence.

8.9 If a Councillor or member of staff are referred to in their capacity as 'Councillor' or role within the Council on any social media platform other than the Council's own social media sites, and are not acting in that regard, a declaration to that effect must be made or the admin of the relevant social media platform should be contacted and asked to change or remove the comment.

APPENDIX A GENERAL GUIDELINES ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

1. Remember that the code of conduct applies to information posted online so Councillors posting on their own social media pages should be particularly aware of this and there should be no blurring between these personal pages and the Council's page (s).
2. If using a personal page, include a disclaimer making it clear that any views expressed are personal views and not the views of the Council. Do not use Council email addresses, or logos or other Council identification.
3. It is best practice that officers post on social media pages on behalf of the Council, rather than Councillors. Any comments are then those of the Council rather than the individual Councillor views.
4. Be aware of any legislation around use of social media, particularly the Data Protection Act and Equality Act.
5. Corporate Council content should not contain party political material, nor promote individual Councillors.
6. Councils are free to advertise/promote community projects on their sites.
7. Do not publish anything that has been received in confidence.
8. Treat others with respect, avoiding personal attacks and disrespectful, rude, or offensive comments.
9. Ensure that any posts do not bring the Council into disrepute.
10. Make commenting policy clear – allowing offensive and disrespectful comments to stand on the site(s) can put off other members of the community from commenting. Comments made on social media may be used in evidence, in any complaint, inquiry etc. Councils are therefore advised to have a robust moderation policy.
11. Disagreements should be allowed – deleting the comments of people who disagree with the Council is not democratic, nor the way to gain respect. But offensive comments or personal attacks should not be permitted and should be removed.
12. Think before publishing – remember the immediacy of the message delivery on social media sites – a hastily posted message even if retracted may have already been seen by members of the community. Consider also that messages posted on social media can be spread outside of the intended audience.

APPENDIX B - UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES WHEN USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

1. Be human. Be approachable in your language and tone.
2. Be engaging. Respond to questions and talk back when you can move the conversation on or help.
3. Be professional. Remember that you are representing your authority.
4. Share and say where it came from. You can share what others have posted but it is polite to acknowledge and attribute where this has come from.
5. You can't control, only contribute. You cannot stop conversation amongst residents. You can only contribute to it.
6. Content is king. By creating sharable and engaging content you can contribute to the conversation and be heard.
7. Be authentic. Don't try and pretend to be something you are not. Ghosted accounts are not authentic.
8. Be trusting. We cannot monitor every conversation, letter, phone call or email. Trust your staff and you will gain far more than you will lose.
9. Be strategic. Plan ahead – who do you want to engage with, why and how? What do you want to achieve?

APPENDIX C - Social media policy - Do's and don'ts template from the Local Government

Association.

This policy has been developed following a survey of over 120 local government Councillors and officers up and down the country. It is intended to open the door to social media use in your local authority rather than block it.

If you stick to this one simple rule you won't go too far wrong: **Don't post any message on social media that you wouldn't happily say in a public meeting.**

LGA Policy template: Do's and don'ts at a glance

Do

- talk to residents, staff, and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly)
- trust your teams and staff to use social media
- be responsible
- be respectful
- be innovative – different approaches work for different people
- have a personality – corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media
- share other people's helpful content and links
- credit other people's work, ideas, and links

listen (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation)

- ask your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them)
- have a rota where appropriate – share the load and you'll get more from your accounts
- adhere to your existing policies – you don't need a separate policy especially for social media
- and more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to engage, openly and honestly.

Don't

- broadcast or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly
- block social media – social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk
- try to cover up mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- build accounts and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations
- assume that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm, and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells
- post content which will embarrass your Council or yourself
- ignore legal advice, it's there to help you
- think that a disclaimer in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- expect your staff to make do with old technology which can be a barrier to effective working
- share your passwords with anyone other than your communications leads
- forget that social media is 24/7 – just because you leave at 5.00 pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile.