



KING'S SOMBORNE PARISH COUNCIL

MEDIA POLICY

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PRESS, MEDIA and SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council adopts as transparent a policy as possible in dealing with enquiries from the media and members of the public in recognition of the democratic structure of the Council, the delivery of public services and its commitment to Freedom of Information.

2. Points of contact

- 2.1 The Chairman and/or the Clerk, have the main responsibility for fielding media/public enquiries, issuing news releases and communicating with staff, editing the Council website and dealing with Freedom of Information requests. A Councillor may have delegated authority to undertake aspects of this at the discretion of the Council.

3. Media Outlets

- 3.1 There will be a variety of local newspapers, radio stations, television companies and major news (freelance) agencies feeding the national press interested in Council and other local activities. All of them have staff reporters operating in the area and there is a growing network of community newspapers and community radio stations with which the Chairman and/or Clerk should develop a working liaison.

4. Press Releases

- 4.1 The Council will release articles to the media as the need arises. It can also display them on the Council website. Articles are issued by the Clerk to ensure consistency of quality and presentation.

5. Handling Media Enquiries

- 5.1 Calls from national newspapers and general media enquiries are to be channelled through the Chairman or Clerk.
- 5.2 Any media inquiry relating to a matter of a serious or disciplinary nature is to be referred to the Chairman.

6. Media Training

- 6.1 The Chairman and Clerk should, as necessary, undergo training to assist them in handling enquiries from the media.

7. Social media - General

- 7.1 Social media can bring great advantages in communication and this policy is intended to encourage its responsible use.
- 7.2 Users of social media must ensure that they act sensibly and responsibly without adversely affecting the Council or damaging its reputation and credibility. They must also ensure they keep to any Council guidelines regarding the use of social media.
- 7.3 The use by staff of social media whilst at work is currently restricted to the King's Somborne Parish Council Facebook page. The use of Twitter by staff is not currently permitted nor is use of chat rooms. Employees using social media must be aware of and comply with the Council's Social Media policy.

- 7.4 The following guidelines should be followed by staff and by Councillors when acting in their capacity as a Councillor, or when signing off an email, comment, posting, or any other form of digital entry in social media as a Councillor. Where necessary, a Councillor should add the caveat that ‘the views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views and opinions of King’s Somborne Parish Council’.
- 7.5 No Parish Council content should be published unless it is already on the Council’s website, or with the prior approval of the Clerk. Information should be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
- 7.6 All should remember that what is published will be in the public domain
- indefinitely and that you may be held personally responsible for the content that you publish.
 - compliance with data protection, intellectual property and copyright laws should be ensured.
 - confidential matters from Council meetings must not be published or reported on in social media.
 - details about customers, partners or suppliers should not be referred to without their prior written approval (ensuring no advertisement of the services and goods of third parties).
 - staff and councillors must refrain from promoting themselves as working for the Council, in a way which has, or may have, the effect of bringing the Council into disrepute.
 - staff and Councillors must not disclose personal data or information about the Council, or its service users, employees or councillors that breach the Data Protection Act 1998 (e.g. photographs, images).
 - staff and Councillors must not give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers unless specifically required for the purposes of the comment or posting, for example to give contact details that need to be publicised for which permission has been given, or for which details are already available in the public domain.
 - staff and Councillors must not make any defamatory remarks about the Council, its service users, employees, other Councillors or conduct themselves in a way that is detrimental to the Council.
 - staff and Councillors must not use insulting, offensive or racist language, or engage in any other conduct that would not be acceptable in the workplace.
 - staff and Councillors must not receive, send, or display offensive messages or pictures.
 - Staff and Councillors must not issue passwords to third parties unless authorised to do so, or use anyone else’s password or identity.

8. Control of the King’s Somborne Parish Council Facebook Page

- 8.1 Postings may only be made by an appointed Councillor or the Clerk, who will be responsible for removing any unacceptable comments. Comments by others will be considered unacceptable if they do not follow the guidelines outlined above for staff and Councillors. The appointed Councillor will use his best endeavours to check the Facebook page each working day, with arrangements being put into place for others to check the page during holiday periods.
- 8.2 Postings by others are not permitted on the King’s Somborne Parish Council Facebook page unless there is a clear case for doing so. Such cases to be determined by the appointed Councillor or the Clerk.

Guidance on use of Social Media by Councillors

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 (but are not limited to) [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#), [Blogger](#), [Wordpress](#) and [YouTube](#). The important thing to remember about social media is that it is social. It is about communication.

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:

□ 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 councillors Code of Conduct. 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.

□ 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, then linking back to your site and saying you are gagging those who disagree with you.

□ 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.

□ “Following” and “friending”

Some of the terminology in social media, like ‘following’ or ‘friending’ can imply an intimacy that’s not really 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 Members 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 Council 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.

□ *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.

□ 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.

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.

d) Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything on your blog that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

e) 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.

f) 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.

g) Electoral periods

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

While the above list is not exhaustive, it does highlight some of the more obvious issues. Almost all of 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 Council's position on pothole repair (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 or political party, rather than your personal opinion. 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 Council or a political party.

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 politically. 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 Councillors' Code of Conduct 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 would 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. Elections – Purdah

The same guidance applies to your use of social media during the "purdah" period before elections. Purdah does not affect a councillor's ability to use social media in the normal responsible way **provided you are not using Council resources to do so** where you wish to perhaps promote an election candidate or a particular political party. The use of Council hosted member blogs while not currently supported by the council would tend, in any event, to be suspended during purdah. It is worth remembering, of course, that there can be heightened tension and debate at election time and comments can be made in the heat of the moment which, on reflection, would not have been said or made in the normal course of events and which could lead to allegations of councillor misconduct.