GRINDON AND THORPE THEWLES PARISH COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Scope:

The aim of this Policy is to provide guidance to Grindon and Thorpe Thewles Parish 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):

- Parish Council Website
- Facebook, Myspace and other social networking sites
- X (Twitter) and other micro blogging sites
- Youtube and other video clips and podcast sites
- LinkedIn
- Bloggs and discussion forums
- Parish Council Emails

The principles of the Policy apply to Parish Councillors and the Clerk to the Council. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Parish Council. The policy sits alongside relevant existing polices which need to be taken into consideration. No direct costs will be incurred by implementing it. The use of social media is not to replace existing forms of communication. The website and 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.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct apply to online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication. Online content should be objective, balanced, informative, and accurate. What you write on the web is permanent. In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using their websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters, see further notes below.

Social Media Policy

1. The Council will appoint a Moderator. The Moderator will be responsible for posting and monitoring of the content to ensure that it complies with this Policy. The Moderator will have authority to remove any posts made by third parties from our social media pages which are deemed to be of a defamatory or libellous nature. Such posts will also be reported to the Hosts (i.e. Facebook) by the Moderator.

2. The Council will appoint a nominated "Webmaster" to maintain and update the Parish Council Website, this will usually be the Clerk.
   The social media may be used to
   - **Post** minutes and **dates of meetings**
   - **Advertise events and activities**
   - Good news stories linked website or press page
   - Vacancies
   - Retweeting or 'share' information from partners i.e. Police, Library and Health etc.
   - **Announcing new information**
   - Post or share information from other Parish related community groups/clubs/associations/bodies e.g. Schools, sports clubs and community groups
   - **Refer resident queries to the clerk and all other councillors**

     Facebook will be used to support the website information above.
     Emails will be used to distribute information of council business. Individual Parish councillors are responsible for what they post.

Code of Practice - Guidance when using social media (including email).

3. All social media sites in use should be checked and updated on a regular basis and ensure that the security settings are in place.

4. When participating in any online communication:

   a. Be responsible and respectful; be direct, informative, brief and transparent.
   b. Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Parish Council. Never make false or misleading statements.
   c. Parish Councillors should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All Parish Councillors need to be mindful of the information they post on sites and make sure personal opinions are not published as being that of the Council. They need to ensure that they don't bring the Council or their role as a Councillor into disrepute. Any action must not be contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct or any other Policies.
   d. Keep the tone of your comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud." Use sentence case format, do not use capital letters, or write in red to emphasis points.
   e. Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks. Language that may be deemed as offensive relating, in particular, to race, sexuality, disability, gender, age, religion or belief should not be published on any social media site.
   f. Avoid personal attacks, online fights and hostile communications.
   g. Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
   h. 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.

5. Respect the privacy of other councillors and residents. Never publish anything you have received in confidence.

6. Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations, (*see below Libel and copyright*).

7. Residents and Councillors should note that not all communication requires a response.
   a. There will not be immediate responses to communications as they may be discussed by the Parish Council and **all responses will be agreed by the Parish Council**.
   b. The Parish Clerk and the Moderator will be responsible for all final, published responses.
   c. 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 Councillors. Again, the poster shall be informed via the page or direct message that this is the case.
   d. If the Moderator feels unable to answer a post for example of a contentious nature this shall be referred to the Parish Clerk. The poster will inform by way of response to this fact.
   e. 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 available agenda. Any response will then be included in the minutes of the meeting.

8. The nominated Moderator shall remove any negative posts which may contain personal and inflammatory remarks, libellous or defamatory information without further comment or notification. They will:
   (i) Spell and grammar check everything.
   (ii) Correct any errors promptly.

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

10. Any complaints will be dealt with by using the Parish Council's complaints procedure

11. The Policy will be reviewed annually.

Libel and Copyright

Additional background information (IDeA) 2010

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

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything 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.

Obscene material

Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Electoral periods and purdah

You should avoid making ***any*** social media posting during 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 (i.e. social media posts). There are additional requirements too, 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 www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-weregulate/ candidates-and-agents.

The 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 particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Members' Code of Conduct

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". Councillors can have 'blurred' identities, you may have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor and as an individual. Ensure it is clear when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is the 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. Councillors may be communicating politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the council, for example blogging as a 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 councillor. That applies 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 a Facebook profile.

There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast rule. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a councillor, the privacy settings on your blog or social networking site, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most 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 judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a 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 council websites may give or reinforce the impression that you are representing the council. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona separate from your 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 really 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 council, local police service or 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. X (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!

References:

CivicSurf is a blogging programme for local leaders www.civicsurf.org.uk.

Socitm Insight has produced *Social Media – Why ICT management should encourage leadership to embrace it* (January 2010) and *Twitter Gritters: Council use of digital channels in emergencies.* (February 2010)

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) 2010. Connected councillors - A guide to using social media to support local leadership. IDeA March 2010

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