

Capel Parish Council

Guidelines on the use of Social Media

Background

The development and widespread use of social media as well as providing an opportunity has placed additional constraints on the way councillors carry out their duties. Social media are by their very nature interactive processes and revolve around “conversations”; and as they occur online they will remain permanent. Councillors must take care and be respectful of what is posted and where, as there is potentially a large audience.

Capel Parish Council plans to establish a forum on the “Alternative Capel Parish Website” which can provide a valuable means for councillors to communicate in both directions with a wide cross-section of residents but care needs to be taken in the way it is used. Attached at Appendix A are some specific guidelines for councillors on the use of this forum and other Social Media activities.

Scope

When considering using any form of social media there are three points that councillors must always accept and agree to. These are as follows:

- 1) Unless they are specifically authorised in writing, councillors must understand and state that they are communicating on a personal basis
- 2) Councillors may report decisions made by the council but must take care to ensure that any comments made respect the Council’s view
- 3) Councillors must consider what they are communicating very carefully and take all reasonable steps to ensure the views expressed could not be misinterpreted in any way

A breach of the above could bring the council into disrepute. Any alleged breach could lead to further action being taken in respect of the councillor concerned including, as appropriate, referral to the Monitoring Office and Standards Committee.

These guidelines refer to any online activity which takes place on a “Social site” including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, You Tube, My Space, Wikipedia and Fora including The Capel Parish websites. It applies to the creation of contents as well as commenting on other’s content in public, whether made as a councillor or in a personal or professional capacity.

When using social media platforms councillors or employees of the Council should never engage in false, inappropriate, threatening, harassing or defaming conduct that would be harmful to the Council or its employees or would damage Council relationships.

Councillors must never disclose confidential information that they obtain through their position as a councillor. Councillors and staff must abide by the Data Protection Act 1998 when using social media. Ideally confidential information should be marked as such on communication between councillors and/or outside bodies.

Council logos, headings or imagery can only be used by councillors if consent has been given by the Parish Council. The council reserves the right to delete any comments which may be offensive to the Council or others when posted on the sites it maintains.

Councillors Code of Conduct

All rules regarding appropriate behaviour and conduct as stated in other policies are applicable online and within social media as with other forms of communication both inside and outside of the council. In particular, councillors must behave in accordance with the principles and members obligations of the Council's Code of Conduct.

The Council reserves the right to take appropriate action with regards to any councillors or staff who fail to abide by the policy. Unless expressly authorised by the Council all comment on social sites by Councillors and employees of the Council shall be expressed on an individual's opinion and not that of the Council.

Guidelines

These guidelines are intended to supplement not replace the Code of Conduct, which should be regarded as definitive

Social media and forum websites can provide a valuable means for councillors to communicate with a wide cross-section of parishioners, but care needs to be taken in the way it is used particularly because these applications allow you to interact with others. These guidelines aim to avoid some potential problems. They are not exhaustive and do not replace the need for councillors to display the same courtesy and common sense when posting online as elsewhere.

- 1) **Out of Context:** Postings may be read by anyone and might be taken out of context. Postings should be clear and unambiguous and any necessary context or background should be explained or referred to. You should re-read what you have typed and ask yourself is this clear before you submit it.
- 2) **Avoid Misinterpretation:** Consider whether your posting could be misinterpreted, either because the reader is not aware of the background or context or deliberately to put you in a bad light.
- 3) **Don't have to respond:** Do not feel obliged to respond to a thread if you do not have anything constructive to add
- 4) **State your Capacity:** Councillors may post on a forum as a private individual, as a member of the Parish Council or on behalf of the Parish Council or one of its committees. They should make it very clear in which capacity they are posting but should be aware that any statement they make is likely to be interpreted in the light of their role as a councillor, whatever they say.
- 5) **Stick to facts and agreed Policies:** When councillors are posting in their capacity as Councillors they should stick to matters of fact and agreed Council policy. Where this is not the case they should make it clear they are speaking in an individual capacity and not as a spokesperson for the Council

- 6) **Avoid Pseudonyms:** To avoid confusion, councillors should make postings only under their own name
- 7) **Announcements:** Announcements made officially on behalf of the Council should generally be made as news items, although they may be copied or referred to in a forum posting if discussion is being encouraged
- 8) **Official Postings:** Postings which are on behalf of the Parish Council or which state Parish Council's policy will generally be made by the Parish Clerk. If this is not possible, the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Chairman of Committees, groups or working parties or individual councillors may make such postings but only after appropriate consultation. They should make it clear that the posting is on behalf of the Council or one of its committees, groups or working parties rather than being a personal view.
- 9) **Controversial Topics:** Postings on topics which might be considered controversial should be restricted to statements of fact or of policies the Parish Council as formally agreed
- 10) **Respect Others:** When posting councillors should refer to other councillors, officials of the council and members of the public courteously.
- 11) **Avoid Pre-determination:** If councillors comment on matters which may be the subject of a decision by the council or one of its committees or groups, they should be careful to avoid showing prejudice.
- 12) **Avoid Commenting on Decisions:** Councillors should avoid commenting on decisions taken by the Parish Council with the exception of point 15 below
- 13) **Avoid Debate:** Councillors should refrain from engaging in debate, particularly with anonymous posters. However, if a thread relating to the work of the Parish Council seems ill-informed they may offer factual corrections, provide relevant background or explain the reasons for decisions taken by the Council. In contentious cases they should consider consulting other councillors before posting
- 14) **Maintain Confidentiality:** Councillors must not post on any forum anything which they may have been given or told in confidence or that is confidential.
- 15) **Be Aware of Liability:** If in doubt do not comment publically but seek advice.
- 16) **No Campaigning:** Councillors may not use the Parish websites (or any facilities provided at the expense of the Parish Council) to campaign for election.
- 17) **Be mindful of hidden Implications:** The implications of "Friending", "Linking", "Following" or accepting may have unforeseen outcomes and require careful consideration
- 18) **Correct Mistakes:** If you make a mistake, admit it, be up front and be quick to correct it. If you amend an earlier blog make it clear that you have done so
- 19) **Be a valued Member:** Make sure you are making valuable contributions and insights and do not hijack a thread for personal or political gain
- 20) **Disclaimer:** Use a disclaimer where appropriate. For example: The postings on the site reflect my personal view and not that of the Capel Parish Council.
- 21) **Be Responsible:** What you write is ultimately your responsibility; it is not a right but an opportunity. Abide by the Parish Council Code of Conduct.
- 22) **Check before you post:** Re-read your comments or better still have it checked by a fellow councillor before pressing, "send". Context, Factual, Accurate, Misinterpretation, Capacity, Approval, Responsible.