



## MARKFIELD PARISH COUNCIL MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS & SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

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### 1. Introduction.

This policy is advised by the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity dated 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011. The Code is statutory guidance and the Parish Council must have regard to it and follow its provisions. Failure to follow the Council's policy could lead to a breach of the Code and the risk of adverse publicity, which could damage the Parish Council's reputation.

Without proper co-ordination it would be difficult to ensure that the messages put out by the Parish Council are consistent and accurate. However, if communication is managed effectively, the Parish Council will be able to create and seize opportunities to communicate with partners and the public and build an accurate and positive reputation.

The Parish Council throughout the year:

- receives enquiries from the media;
- issues news releases;
- organises photo opportunities;
- arranges interviews;
- produces its own publications within the local press.

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all Officers and Members involved in dealing with the media and to provide guidance on how to handle media interest. It is also to ensure that the Parish Council is seen to communicate in a professional and objective manner.

This policy does not seek to regulate Parish Councillors in their private capacity but does provide advice and guidance on their sensible use of conventional and social media. The Parish Council's communications with the media seek to represent the corporate position and views of the Parish Council. If the views of Parish Councillors are different to the Parish Council's corporate position and views, they will make this clear.

Subject to the obligations on Parish Councillors not to disclose information referred to in section 13 and not to misrepresent the Parish Council's position, Parish Councillors are free to communicate their position and views.

In all cases, the Parish Council's approach, in accordance with the Code, to the media should:

- be lawful;
- be cost effective;
- be objective;
- be even-handed;
- be appropriate;
- have regard to the Parish Council's Equality & Diversity Policy;
- be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity.

## **2. The Parish Council's approach to publicity.**

The media plays an important role in informing residents about what the Parish Council does and how it spends their money. It is therefore vital that the Parish Council communicates effectively with the media and wherever possible takes a positive approach to meeting media requests for information and interviews so that:

- The Parish Council is recognised as one which is open, accountable, accessible and willing to listen;
- There are opportunities to share and celebrate the Parish Council's successes;
- Information is provided about policies and services as well as the democratic process so that people feel more informed about the Parish Council and its work;
- Negative issues are handled clearly and decisively.

The main media are the local and regional press together with local radio and television stations. It is unlikely that Markfield would be involved in media communications at a national, international or specialist level but this policy is written to ensure that it is relevant to these cases should they occur. It is also recognised that the internet is the fastest growing area of the media and that many broadcasters and newspapers include information on the town.

## **3. Identifying Newsworthy Items.**

It is the responsibility of everyone working within the Parish Council to identify newsworthy items; these will include a range of Parish Council activities and decisions and it is the responsibility of the Parish Clerk to make the decision as to whether or not a press release should be issued.

#### **4. Handling Media Enquiries.**

The Parish Clerk co-ordinates all media enquiries to the Parish Council. Members and Parish Council staff who are directly approached by the media should not attempt to answer questions themselves without establishing the full facts. If members are in any doubt, they should consult the Parish Clerk. Parish Council staff should refer all media enquiries to the Parish Clerk in the first instance.

The Parish Council will not provide observations on leaks, anonymous allegations or allegations about individual staff and Members. However, the phrase “no comment” should be avoided as a response to a media enquiry. The Parish Council endeavours to be as open and accountable as possible and should always try to explain if there is a reason why it cannot answer a specific enquiry.

#### **5. Press Releases.**

The use of press releases is a key technique for publicising Parish Council activities, decisions and achievements. An official Parish Council release is made on behalf of the Parish Council as a whole; it will be written and issued by the Parish Clerk. Official Parish Council releases will follow a corporate style appropriate for the media being targeted and a central record will be maintained. All releases will accurately reflect the corporate view of the Parish Council, contain relevant facts and may include an approved quotation from an appropriate Parish Councillor. Parish Council press releases will not promote the views of specific political groups, publicise the activities of individual Parish Councillors, identify a Member’s political party or persuade the general public to hold a particular view.

All official Parish Council press releases will be placed on the Parish Council’s website within three working days of issue.

#### **6. Interviews.**

Any member of staff or elected member who is contacted by a journalist requesting an interview in their capacity as a representative of the Parish Council should refer the matter to the Parish Clerk. The person put forward for interview will depend on the situation and the information required by the journalist. Officers should never give their opinion on specific Parish Council policy but must keep to the corporate line and key messages, their role being to provide expertise and factual knowledge only in support of the Parish Council’s approved and agreed policies.

#### **7. Media Coverage of Meetings.**

Provision is made for members of the media to attend Parish Council and Committee meetings. During meetings Members and officers should be mindful that any comments and messages are put across in a manner which gives the journalist an accurate picture rather than relying on the journalist’s interpretation of what may be a complex issue.

Where a meeting of the Parish Council and its committees includes an opportunity for public participation, the media may speak and ask questions. Public participation is regulated by the Parish Council’s Standing Orders.

#### **8. Publicity during Elections.**

The rules governing publicity change when an election has been announced. In the period between the notice of an election and the election itself (‘purdah’) all proactive publicity about candidates and other politicians is halted. This applies to scheduled local and national elections. During this period Parish

Council publicity should not deal with controversial issues or report views, proposals or recommendations in a way that identifies them with individual Members or groups of Members. This is to make sure that no individual Parish Councillor or political party gains an unfair advantage by appearing in corporate publicity. In these circumstances, where a quote is required the relevant Officer may be quoted, in accordance with the guidelines in this policy.

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature - and this 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](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk). Accounts may need to be closed for a defined period before local and national elections in order to comply with legislation which affects local authorities.

Political blogs cannot be linked from the Parish Council's website and the Parish Council will not promote Parish Councillors' Social Media accounts during the election period.

Parish Council Members are reminded that they must not misuse Parish Council resources for political or other inappropriate purposes. Any queries regarding publicity during a period should always be referred to the Parish Clerk for further advice.

#### **9. Non-Town Council Related Media.**

Officers and Members of the Parish Council who have contact with the media in a personal capacity or as members of non-Parish Council related organisations must not refer to their Parish Council posts and must make it clear to the journalist concerned that they are speaking in a personal capacity or on behalf of the non-Parish Council related organisation.

#### **10. Managing Negative Issues.**

From time to time the Parish Council has to respond to negative issues. It is important that these situations are managed carefully so as to limit the potential for negative publicity.

Members and Officers must alert the Parish Clerk as soon as a potentially negative issue which may attract media interest is known. They should not wait until contact is made by the media. Members and Officers must be prepared to work together to prepare holding statements, other information and carry out research even if no media have contacted the Parish Council about an issue.

#### **11. Correcting Inaccurate Reporting.**

Should the media publish or broadcast something inaccurate about the Parish Council, a quick decision needs to be taken on any action necessary to correct it. The issue should be discussed with the Parish Clerk to decide what action is appropriate. This could be a letter or news release, a conversation with the journalist concerned, a personal letter to the editor or legal advice. It will also be necessary to decide who is the most appropriate person to take the agreed action.

It should be noted that in the case of minor inaccuracies which have little or no impact on the message being conveyed, it can sometimes be counterproductive to complain; each case should be judged individually.

Occasionally the Parish Council will get something wrong. In these cases, damage limitation is the key – this can usually be achieved by admitting the mistake, apologising and stating how the Parish Council will learn from the error or put it right.

## **12. Parish Council Publications**

The Parish Council currently does not have its newsletter. However, should this situation change, the aims of any in-house publication is to promote Parish Council policies, services, activities and initiatives.

## **13. Freedom of Information and Data Protection.**

Should the Parish Council receive a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on a topic on which there is correspondence (written or email), that correspondence will normally have to be disclosed unless it is exempt. The fact that the disclosure may prove embarrassing would not, in itself, prevent disclosure. In addition, care should be taken when processing personal data.

The Data Protection Act 1998 prevents the use of personal information other than for the purposes for which it was supplied. Members should bear this in mind when using any personal data which may be supplied to them by their constituents.

The Parish Council cannot disclose confidential information or information the disclosure of which is prohibited by law. The Parish Council cannot disclose information if this is prohibited under the terms of a court order, by legislation, the Parish Council's standing orders, under contract or by common law. Parish Councillors are subject to additional restrictions about the disclosure of confidential information which arise from the code of conduct adopted by the Parish Council, a copy of which is available via the Parish Council's web site.

## **14. Website.**

The Parish Council website is an important vehicle for the promotion of Parish Council and wider town activities. The website will not:

- contain content that may result in actions for libel, defamation or other claims for damages;
- be used to process personal data other than for the purpose stated at the time of capture;
- promote any political party or used for campaigning;
- promote personal financial interests or commercial ventures;
- be used for personal campaigns;
- be used in an abusive, hateful or disrespectful manner.

## **15. Social media.**

### **15.1 Introduction.**

Social media is a generic term for the sharing opinions, gossip, discussions, stories, video, pictures and information electronically. The key feature of such systems is that they enable users to interact with each other rapidly online and can be accessed in different ways – via computers, tablets and phones. Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, You Tube, Pinterest, Snip.It, Linked-In and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

Whilst these tools are very useful to share information quickly with other people, there are downsides: The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. You do not even need to register in many cases to view the content. Registering is only required should you wish to participate and post to the site.

Groups on specific themes can set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.

The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately and it is too easy to respond without thinking and inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience. The Parish Council may make use of these tools to quickly disseminate information but carefully control their use in order to minimise the risks above.

Parish Councillors are at liberty to set up personal accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and do not in any way imply that they reflect the Parish Council's view. Town Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language.

## **15.2 Aims and Objectives.**

Social media can be used by the Parish Council as an effective and measurable way to achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

The aim of this part of the policy is to ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and successful promotion of Parish Council-based services through the use of social media;
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media;
- That Parish Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media;
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation;
- That the Parish Council is not brought into disrepute.

Social media activity isn't something that stands alone. To be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be included in social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

## **15.3 Policy Statement.**

It is acknowledged that there is significant potential for using social media and that this can bring great advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is actively encouraged. The following applies equally to Officers and Members.

This policy provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Parish Council information or computer systems/networks.

Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Parish Council or its business, not bring it into disrepute or otherwise violate any Parish Council policies.

The following guidelines will apply to all online participation by officers and members:

- Remember that you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media;
- Never give out other people's personal details such as home address and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Data Protection Act;
- Use a disclaimer. When using social media for personal purposes, you must not imply you are speaking for the Parish Council. Avoid use of the Parish Council e-mail address, logos or other Parish Council identification. Make it clear that what you say is representative of your personal views only. Where possible, you should include a standard disclaimer, such as: "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions";
- Know your obligations: you must comply with other Parish Council policies when using social media; For example, you should be careful not to breach Parish Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies;
- Show respect to all. You should be respectful of the Parish Council and its employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong.

#### **15.4 Responsibilities.**

The Parish Clerk is the designated Parish Council 'owner' of the Town Council Social Media channels. Parish Councillors are at liberty to set up their own personal accounts but are legally responsible for their content and they should ensure they comply with this policy.

#### **15.5 Guidance for Parish Councillors.**

The Parish Council encourages Parish Councillors to keep residents informed of Markfield issues and the use of social media can help with this. The following are general guidelines for the operation of such accounts. Parish Councillors using social media should make use of stringent privacy settings if they do not wish them to be accessed by the press and public.

- Where possible, a Parish Councillor should make clear who they are in the profile of any account and whether they are an authorised representative of the Parish Council, unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. In such instances, the Council's Parish Clerk must be consulted.
- Parish Councillors are personally responsible for the content which they publish on any form of social media. Publishing – or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) – an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may amount to libel.
- Parish Councillors should ensure that they comply at all times with the Members' Code of Conduct and other relevant Parish Council policies such as the Freedom of Information and Equality and Diversity Policies.
- Parish Councillors must treat others with respect, avoid personal attacks and not make disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.
- When commenting online on any matter relating to the Town Council, Parish Councillors should identify themselves as a Parish Councillor (for instance in their profile) and make it clear whether or not they are representing the views of the Parish Council. They must not make anonymous posts nor use a pseudonym when making such comments so as to hide their identity.
- Parish Councillors must be aware of their own safety when placing information on the Internet and should not publish information which could give details which could leave them vulnerable.

- Any Parish Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, Parish Clerk and/or the police.
- They should use a secure password (generally more than eight characters long and using a mixture of letters and numbers) and never share their password with anyone.

Below are some guidelines for Parish Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- Handheld devices and laptops are permitted (indeed encouraged) for use during meetings to allow environmentally friendly and effective communication. The use of such devices is intended to improve communication during meetings - not to interrupt or distract anyone taking part. Ensure the volume on all electronic devices is turned to 'mute';
- Parish Councillors' tweets/blogs during council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will show the public and other attendees at the meeting that you are not engaging properly in the meeting;
- Parish Councillors have a responsibility to take Parish Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. Markfield residents expect debate and to be informed about Parish Council business, not witness petty arguments;

Remember that if you break the law using social media (for example by posting something defamatory), you will be personally responsible.

#### **15.6 Measures.**

As a Parish Council we are interested in measures of engagement. This can be measured in terms of the number of followers, subscribers, re-posts and likes. Website, Facebook and Twitter statistics will provide this measure.

#### **15.7 Sustainability Implications.**

The potential environmental and sustainability implications have been considered by this policy. It is recognised that the regulated use of social media has the potential to make a positive impact on communities and social wellbeing. By establishing greater links with members of the public, community groups, partners and stakeholders, through social networking, there is scope for more open communication and the increased ability to share information and to improve service delivery.

This form of communication can be engaged to tackle a wide variety of issues and to influence change. As a cost-effective form of resource, social media is likely to become a more popular choice when it comes to developing relationships, sharing information and communicating Parish Council messages.

#### **15.8 Facebook Policy.**

Social networks are rapidly growing in popularity and are used by all ages in society. The most popular social networks are web-based, commercial, and not purposely designed for Parish Council use. They include sites like Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga. For individuals, social networking sites provide tremendous opportunities for staying in touch with friends and family.

For the Parish Council these sites provide a modern alternative means to communicate with residents of the Parish. Facebook, for example, offers a rich platform allowing the Parish Council to share unlimited content, including images and videos.



Example activity:

- Share articles / blog posts / expertise;
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction;
- Product-centric posts with engaging and interesting content;
- Create surveys to encourage participation from residents and visitors;
- Share positive product reviews / client testimonials;
- Upload product images and videos;
- Competitions;
- Generic news – what’s happening in the area.

One of the hallmarks of online networks is the ability to “friend” others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Care should be exercised when accepting invitations to friend others within personal social networking sites.

Parish Councillors may set up their own Facebook pages, but in doing so they accept sole responsibility for the maintenance of those pages and will be personally responsible for ensuring that it complies with legislation.

Some good practice guidelines for Parish Councillors using Facebook follow below:

- As a Parish Council, we have a professional image to uphold and how members conduct themselves online impacts this image;
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others;
- Post only what you want the world to see. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site;
- Do not disclose confidential matters or criticise council personnel;
- Set your profile’s security and privacy settings carefully. At a minimum, all privacy settings should be set to “only friends”. “Friends of friends” and “Networks and Friends” open the content to a large group of unknown people;
- Do not post images that include young people without parental permission;
- Pay close attention to the site's security settings and allow only approved personnel full access to the site;
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libelous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations;
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness at the Parish Council at risk;
- To reduce security risks, do not install any external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games;
- Maintain updated anti-virus and malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer;
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page;
- If you find information, on the social networking site that falls under the mandatory reporting guidelines then you must report it as required by law.

Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

## **15.9 Twitter Policy.**

Twitter is a 'microblogging' platform which allows users to post short messages and converse with other users. Unlike email or text messaging, these conversations take place in the open and engage audiences in discussions about services, products and issues– connecting a vast amount of likeminded people in an often targeted and purposeful way.

Example activity:

- Share relevant articles / blog posts / expertise;
- Start discussions and ask questions to encourage interaction;
- Link to Facebook content / surveys / pictures / videos;
- Follow and participate in discussions with other related tweeters;
- Comment on tweets and re-tweet other posts to build community;
- Offer relevant Q&A sessions.

Any Parish Council Twitter account that is set up is to inform followers of news, events, online facilities and other matters that may be of interest to residents of the community, local businesses and visitors to the area.

Parish Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts. Some good practice guidelines for Parish Councillors follow.

Key questions when tweeting are:

- What do the readers really want to know?
- When do they need to know it?
- Why is the information you're sharing relevant?

*Keep the content valuable!*

Negative comments should only be responded to with factual information and on-line arguments should always be avoided.

## **16. Review**

This policy will be reviewed by the Parish Council on an annual basis.

**The Council adopted this Policy at its meeting held on 8 June 2021**