

Laceby Village Council

Social Media & Communications Policy

1. Aims

The aim of this policy is to set out a Code of Practice and provide guidance to Laceby Village Councillors, Village Council staff and others who engage with the council. This includes, but is not limited to, communications, website content, the press, and public and online communications, referred to as social media.

The principles of this policy apply to Village Councillors, Village Council employees and others communicating with the Village Council. It is also intended for guidance for others communicating with the Village Council. This policy sits alongside relevant existing policies which include:

- Code of Conduct Policy
- Data Protection
- Confidentiality Policy
- Freedom of Information Policy
- LPC HR and Employment Policies

The use of social media does not replace existing forms of communication, and the protocols around this, but should be used to enhance communication.

In the main, Councillors and staff 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 websites and promotional material for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters – see further guidelines below.

2. Correspondence

The point of contact for the Village Council is the Clerk, and it is to the Clerk that all correspondence for the village council should be addressed, and from which all correspondence is sent.

Neither the Clerk, nor a Councillor will be the sole custodian of any correspondence or information in the name of the Village Council, a committee or working party.

Councillors and officers do not have the right to obtain confidential information / documentation unless they can demonstrate a 'need to know.'

Councillors will have separate council and personal email addresses.

3. Communications with the Press

The Clerk will clear all press reports, or comments to the press with the Chair of the council following advice from ERNLLCA.

Press reports from the Council, its committees or working parties, should be from the Clerk or via the reporters own attendance at the meeting.

It is not permitted to make any public statement on behalf of the Council which is not supported by a Council decision.

Councillors should not make personal comments which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively affect the credibility of the Council or other members

Unless a Councillor is absolutely certain that he/she is reporting the view of the Council, they must make it clear to members of the public that they are expressing a personal view.

Any complaints from the press or a member of the public will all be dealt with under the Council's adopted complaints procedure or via an agenda item.

4. Communication with Village Residents

The Council will keep residents informed of its activities, projects, forthcoming events, public information, and Local Authority activities through the website, noticeboards, Full Council meetings, minutes, and its newsletter.

5. Councillor Correspondence to External Parties

Wherever possible, the Clerk should send all council correspondence.

Councillors should recognise that the views they express must be those of the Council and not their own.

Councillors should only correspond with external parties where they are authorised or delegated to do so by the whole Village Council. If this is not the case, the Councillor must state that the views are their own personal views and not those of the Council.

A copy of outgoing correspondence relating to the council or the Councillor's role within it, should be sent to the Clerk and noted 'copy to the clerk' so the recipient is aware the Clerk has been advised. The Clerk will keep a copy of all letters electronically.

6. Electronic Communications

Electronic communications, such as emails, will be treated the same way as for a telephone call or letter.

Instant replies should not be expected from the Clerk; but reasons for urgency should be stated to enable the query to be dealt with accordingly.

Information to Councillors will normally be directed via the Clerk.

Emails from Councillors to external parties should be copied to the Clerk.

Emails relating to Council business may be subject to Freedom of Information requests.

The Clerk will retain emails of significance in line with the Document Retention Policy.

7. Social Media

Social media is a term given to websites and online tools which allow users to interact with each other in some way by sharing information, opinions, knowledge, and interests. Examples include:

- Social networking (Facebook, Instagram)
- Video sharing (YouTube)
- Micro-blogging (X (formerly Twitter))

The Village Council does not have any designated Social Media Accounts; however, may use the Laceby Community FB page to share key information and activities relevant to residents.

The Chair of the Village Council or the Clerk to the Village Council will be responsible for administrating Village Council social media information. Village Council posts or Village Council comments on posts should only be made with prior approval from the Chair of the Village Council.

Councillors wishing to utilise social media in respect of the Village Council should email the Clerk with the proposed content and posting instructions with a copy sent to the Chair and Vice Chair. ***Note – where possible posts should cross reference to the Village Council website and provide an appropriate link.*** Once approved by either the Chair or Vice Chair, the Village Clerk will make the post or comment as instructed.

The Village Clerk may initiate posts or comments without prior approval for the purpose of circulating or responding with public domain information, public service notices and details from approved Village Council minutes or on instructions from a full council meeting.

The Village Council Clerk will maintain and update the Village Council Website. This form of social media may be used to:

- Post minutes and dates of meetings
- Post approved council policies and information
- Advertise dates of meetings, events and activities
- Good news stories linked to website or press page
- Vacancies for both Councillors and Staff
- Sharing information from partners (i.e. Police, Library, Community Groups etc)
- Announcing new information
- Publish information about the work of Laceby Village Council to a wider audience.

Individual Village Councillors are responsible for what they post. Councillors are personally responsible for any online activity conducted via their published email address which is used for council business.

Any information published will be factual, fair, thorough, and transparent.

Everyone must be mindful that information published in this way may stay in the public domain indefinitely, without the opportunity for retrieval or deletion.

Copyright laws must be respected.

Conversations or reports which are private, or subject to the exclusion of press and public, must not be published without permission.

Other organisations should not be referenced without their approval.

Do NOT publish anything that would be regarded in the workplace as unacceptable.

Councillors or Villagers who have any concerns regarding content placed on social media sites should report them to the Clerk at the earliest opportunity. Misuse of sites in a manner that is contrary to this and other policies could result in action being taken.

Code of Practice

Guidance when using social media (including email):

- All social media in use should be regularly checked and updated to ensure that the correct security settings are in place.

- When participating in any online communication:
 - As a Village Council we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online impacts this image.
 - Be responsible, respectful; be direct, informative, brief, transparent.
 - Always disclose your identity and affiliation to the Village Council. Never make false or misleading statements.
 - Village Councillors & the Village Council employees should not present themselves in a way that might cause embarrassment. All Village Councillors and employees 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 or bring the Council into disrepute or is contrary to the Council's Code of Conduct and any other Policies.
 - Keep the tone of comments respectful and informative, never condescending or "loud". Use sentence format, not capital letters, or write in red to emphasise points. Spell and grammar check everything, and correct any errors promptly.
 - Refrain from posting controversial or potentially inflammatory remarks, Language that may be deemed as offensive relating in particular to race, sexuality, gender, age, religion, or belief should not be published on any social media site.
 - Avoid personal attacks, online fights, and hostile communications.
 - Never use an individual's name unless you have written permission to do so.
 - 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.
 - Respect the privacy of other councillors and residents.
 - Do not post any information or conduct any online activity that may violate laws or regulations (see below regarding libel and copyright).

8. Meetings

Councillors are summoned to attend public meetings by the Clerk. Only exceptional reasons for non-attendance will be accepted.

The Clerk will notify Councillors, with 3 clear days, of the agenda, date, time, and location of the meeting. The public and press are invited to attend all meetings.

Any recording or filming of the proceedings must be submitted in advance to the Clerk, and the Chair notified prior to the meeting. The person undertaking the recording or filming must ensure they are familiar with the Council's Recording of Meetings Policy.

The Council will meet all reasonable requests to accommodate the press, and respect the privacy of any attending public.

Where Council business is discussed in a closed session, the Council may be approached for comment on items discussed, but must show respect for the confidentiality of the issues discussed.

All meetings will be held in observance of the Council's Standing Orders.

9. Agenda Items for Council, Committees, and Working Parties

The agenda, will be clear, concise and contain sufficient information to enable Councillors to make an informed decision.

The public should be able to understand the matters being considered at the meeting.

Items for information should be kept to a minimum on the agenda.

Where there is a requirement to share for 'information only', this information will be circulated via the Clerk.

10. Review of Policy

This policy will be reviewed every 3 years or earlier should legislation or practice require.

Appendix A - Guidance on Press Relations

Aim

The Aim of Press Relations is to:

- a) Develop a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between the Council and the press.
- b) Explain the Council's policies to the local community.
- c) Communicate important public information messages.
- d) Provide transparency of the Council's actions and enable the public to take part in the Council's work.

It is the responsibility of all Members and Officers to ensure that effective Press Relations are maintained.

Requirements

1. Officers and Members should have due regard for the long-term reputation of the Council in any dealings with the press.
2. Confidential documents, reports and private correspondence should not be disclosed to the press without prior Council approval.
3. The Council's Publication Scheme specifies the information that it publishes or intends to publish, as required by the FOI Act 2000.
4. The Council reserves the right to withhold certain sensitive information as guided by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Data Protection Act 1998, and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.
5. Professional guidance should be taken before any response is made to the press concerning personal privacy information relating to Members and Officers.
6. Any publicity describing the Council's policies and aims should be as objective as possible, concentrating on facts or explanation, or both.
7. 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.
8. Issues must be presented clearly, fairly, and as simply as possible, although should not oversimplify facts, issues, or arguments.
9. Publicity should not attach nor appear to undermine generally accepted moral standards.
10. Press comments must accurately reflect the Council's position on the topic as adopted in Minutes or Policies.
11. All decisions of the Council made in an Open Meeting can be quoted and made available to the press.
12. Councillors should not make personal comments which could damage the reputation of the Council or negatively affect the credibility of the Council or other members.
13. Professional advice should be taken on matters which are or are likely to be subject to legal proceedings.
14. Councillors wishing to make a "Personal Statement" must clearly inform the press that:
 - a. "their comments are made as an individual and are not necessarily the view of the Council"
 - b. "Other Councillors may hold a different view"
 - c. "The matter is still being discussed or resolved by the Council"

Responding to Press Approaches

15. All press, radio or TV approaches should be directed in the first instance to the Clerk who will discuss the nature of the story and if appropriate direct the enquiry to the Chair or other Councillor.
16. All requests for feature articles or broadcast interview or debates should be made through the Clerk.

Proactive Publicity

17. The Council also has a duty to inform the public how their Precept is spent.
18. The Council presents its Draft Budget at an annual Meeting, reports its budget monitoring at Meetings at least quarterly and publicises its Annual Statement of Accounts.
19. The local press may receive copies of agendas for full Council Meetings and will be sent Press Releases regarding specific projects and initiatives.
20. Any Office or Councillor appointed as Spokesperson for the Council must be fully briefed on any issues that are likely to be complex or contentious before communicating with the press.
21. Press Releases must be issued via the Clerk or appointed Councillor to ensure that the principles outlined above are adhered to, to provide a consistency of style and to enable use of the Press Release to be monitored.
22. Written communication should be:
 - a. Authoritative, but not authoritarian
 - b. Communicative, but not irresponsible
 - c. Approachable, without being over-familiar
 - d. Accurate in terms of grammar, spelling, and phraseology, but not old-fashioned
 - e. Concise, but not economical with the truth
 - f. Considered, but not withholding essential information
 - g. Friendly, but not casual.
23. The Protocol for issuing a Press News Release is:
 - a. Identify potential news story
 - b. Preliminary discussion with relevant Officer or Member, if appropriate
 - c. Draft text in house style
 - d. Distribute the Press Release, with a copy to relevant Members and Officers
 - e. Post Press Release on Council website