

East Horsley Parish Council

Adopted 13th July 2020

Social Media Policy

1. POLICY STATEMENT

The use of digital and social media now has a clear and compelling impact on all areas of local government, enabling better and more direct contact between East Horsley Parish Council (“EHPC”) and the people and organizations that it serves and works with. This Social Media Policy (“Policy”) aims to describe how EHPC will use social media to improve and expand the ways in which it communicates with its local residents, local businesses and the various government (local and central) agencies with which it deals. It sets out what is and is not acceptable usage of social media and complements the general rules in the EHPC Code of Conduct for Councillors (“Code of Conduct”).

2. SCOPE

Social media describes a range of websites and online tools which allow people to interact. This includes blogs and postings on a wide range of platforms including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, Instagram, Next Door and Snapchat. Social media is all about sharing information and people use social media platforms to give opinions, create interest groups and to build online communities and network which encourage participation and engagement. This policy relates to any social media communication published by or on behalf of EHPC, any individual in their capacity as either an EHPC Councillor (“Councillor”) or any officially appointed EHPC Communications Manager (“Comms Manager”). From now on in this Policy the term “Councillor” shall be regarded as extending to any such Comms Manager.

3. KEY PRINCIPLES

Any communication is capable of being misinterpreted. The immediacy of social media and the lack of face to face contact can magnify any problem. Information and comments made can be broadcast to a large number of people more quickly than other media. The same rules apply to social media that govern other behaviour as a councillor – but extra care needs to be taken given the immediacy and ease of dissemination. Although social media is conversational in tone, it is recorded, and it is permanent, so content and comment must be accurate, informative and thought through.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACCOUNTABILITIES

Whilst the EHPC Parish Clerk is ultimately responsible for all formal communication between EHPC and members of the public, it is accepted that the immediacy of social media demands a degree of flexibility in the authorisation of social media posts. Therefore it is accepted that the Comms Manager, where time allows with input from another relevant EHPC Committee or Task Group lead, may be delegated to assist the Parish Clerk with social media posts. However all must ensure they follow this policy.

Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own social media accounts but they should ensure they comply with this policy and ensure a 'personal view' disclaimer is used, such as "Statements and opinions here are my own and don't necessarily represent the Council's policies or opinions ."

5. POLICY REQUIREMENTS

5.1 Social media posts –points to follow

Social media posts by EHPC or any Councillor must meet the following criteria:

5.1.1 be civil, tasteful and relevant;

5.1.2 not contain content that is unlawful, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented or racially offensive;

5.1.3 not contain content copied from elsewhere, for which EHPC does not own the copyright, such as extracts from publications or photos;

5.1.4 only make comments that the poster would be prepared to make face to face;

5.1.5 exclude light hearted comment that could be misconstrued;

5.1.6 exclude any information given to the poster in confidence or information acquired by them which they believe or are aware is of a confidential nature;

5.1.7 not contain any personal data of individuals except with express written permission to do so;

5.1.8 not give the impression that they are expressing the views of EHPC when it is not appropriate for them to do so; and

5.1.9 if the poster is involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, exclude anything that might suggest they do not have an open mind.

5.2 Social media principles for EHPC Councillors

5.2.1 It is not a requirement for Councillors to have a personal Facebook or Twitter account or to use other forms of social media to engage with parishioners or otherwise fulfil their role, but this will often be the case. Always spell out clearly whether you are communicating on social media in your capacity as a councillor or as a private individual.

5.2.2 Ensure that you comply with the Code of Conduct whenever you act or appear to act in an official capacity on social media in the same way as with any other form of communication.

5.2.3 Treat others with respect – do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments.

5.2.4 Comply with equality laws – do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith. Never bully or harass anyone – do not say anything that might be construed as bullying or intimidation.

5.2.5 Do not bring EHPC into disrepute – do not publish anything that could reasonably be perceived as reflecting badly upon or lowering the reputation of you or EHPC.

5.2.6 Consider keeping your personal and councillor profile on social networking sites separate. Check you have the appropriate privacy settings for any private blog or networking site. Be aware that you will be seen as acting in your official capacity if you publish information that you could only have accessed by being a councillor.

6 THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND MOBILE DEVICES AT MEETINGS

EHPC encourages Councillors to keep residents informed of East Horsley issues and the use of social media can help with this, including during official Council meetings. Below are some extra guidelines for Councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- handheld devices and laptops are permitted 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';
- 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;
- Councillors have a responsibility to take Council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. East Horsley residents expect debate and to be informed about 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; and
- Councillors should also take heed of the Guildford Borough Council Guidance on the Use of Social Media and Mobile Devices.

7. POTENTIAL LEGAL ISSUES

7.1 Libel – If an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation is published, they may consider it as defamatory and consider legal action.

7.2 Copyright – Using images or text on social media from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos), without obtaining permission, is likely to breach copyright laws.

7.3 Data Protection – Personal data of individuals must not be published unless you have their express permission. Personal information in an email or personal exchange should not be presumed to imply any consent to pass it on to others.

7.4 Bias and Predetermination – Councillors should not say anything on social media (or indeed anywhere) that suggests they have made up their mind on an issue that is due to be formally decided. While your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence, and were genuinely persuadable to a different view, or the decision may be later challenged as invalid.

8. POSTS AND COMPLAINTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA ADDRESSED TO EHPC

8.1 Unless it is posted on EHPC's Facebook page or any official EHPC page of any other social media platform, posting content on a social media platform that directly or indirectly mentions EHPC will not be considered as contacting EHPC for official purposes and EHPC is not obliged to monitor or respond to such postings.

8.2 Where comments, requests for information or complaints addressed to EHPC or any Councillor are posted on official EHPC pages of social media platforms, EHPC will do its best to respond as soon as possible but there may not be an immediate response to such communications as they may need to be discussed by the Parish Council. Where any such post is of a contentious nature EHPC and/or its Parish Clerk may at their discretion determine whether to contact the complainant direct. If the matter cannot be resolved at that stage, then the complaint will be processed in accordance with the EHPC Complaints Procedure.

8.3 Similarly if EHPC or its Parish Clerk receives through any non-social media platform a complaint about a particular use of social media by EHPC or any Councillor, this will be processed in accordance with the EHPC Complaints Procedure.

9. REMOVAL OF THIRD PARTY CONTENT

EHPC will as soon as practically possible remove any comment or content posted on EHPC pages on Facebook or any other social media platform that includes:

- Obscene or racist content
- Personal attacks, insults, or threatening language
- Potentially libellous statements
- Plagiarized material and any other material in violation of any laws, including copyright
- Private, personal information published without consent
- Information or links unrelated to the content of the forum
- Commercial promotions or spam

10. RELATED POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Related policies and procedures include, but are not limited to: EHPC Councillor Code of Conduct, Guildford Borough Council Councillor Code of Conduct, Guildford Borough Council proposed Guidance on the use of Social Media and Mobile Devices, the EHPC Privacy Policy and the EHPC Complaints Procedure.