

## STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL

### GUIDELINES ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

#### Background

The development and widespread use of social media including website fora have 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 and where it is posted as there is potentially a large audience.

Staplehurst Parish Council has established a Forum on the Staplehurst Village website. This can provide a valuable means for Councillors to communicate with a wide cross-section of residents, but care needs to be taken in the way it is used. Attached at Appendix A are specific guidelines for Councillors’ use of the Forum. 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 on the Forum as elsewhere.

#### Scope

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

1. Unless they are specifically authorised, Councillors must understand 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 position.
3. Councillors must consider what they are communicating very carefully and take all reasonable steps to ensure their views could not be misrepresented in any way.

A breach of any 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 Officer and Standards Committee.

These guidelines refer to any online activity which takes place on a “social” site. These include, but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, My Space, Wikipedia and Fora, including the Staplehurst Village Forum – see specific guidelines at Appendix A. It applies to the creation of content as well as commenting on others’ content in public whether it is made as 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 Councillor. Councillors and staff must abide by the Data Protection Act 1998 when using social media.

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 with social media, as with all other forms of communication both inside and outside the Council. In particular, Councillors must behave in accordance with the principles and member obligations of the Council's Code of Conduct.

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

**Approved by Staplehurst Parish Council**

**Date 16<sup>th</sup> September 2013**

**Signed by John Perry, Chairman Staplehurst Parish Council**

**STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL**

**Specific Guidelines for Councillors' use of the Staplehurst Village Forum**

1. These Guidelines are intended to supplement not replace the Code of Conduct, which should be regarded as definitive.
2. The Forum on the Staplehurst Village website 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. 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 on the Forum as elsewhere.
3. Forum postings may be read by anyone and may be taken out of context. Postings should be clear and unambiguous and any necessary context or background should be explained or referred to. It is worth re-reading what you have typed and asking yourself "Is this clear?" before you submit it.
4. Consider whether your posting could be misinterpreted, either because the reader is not aware of the background or context of a posting, or deliberately, to put you or the Council in a bad light.
5. Do not feel obliged to respond to a thread if you do not have anything constructive to add.
6. Councillors may post on the Forum as a private individual, as a member of the Parish Council or on behalf of the Parish Council or one of its committees or groups. 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.
7. When Councillors are posting in their capacity as Councillors they should stick to matters of facts and agreed Council policy. Where this is not the case they should make it clear that they are speaking in a personal capacity and not as a spokesperson for the Council.
8. To avoid confusion, Councillors should make Forum postings only under their own name.
9. Announcements made officially on behalf of the Parish 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.
10. Forum postings which are on behalf of the Parish Council or which state the Parish Council's policy will generally be made by the Parish Clerk. If this is not possible for any reason, the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Chairmen of committees, groups or working parties, or individual Councillors may make such postings, 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 their personal view.

11. Postings by the Parish Clerk on topics which may be considered controversial should be restricted to statements of fact or of policies which the Parish Council has formally agreed.
12. When posting on the Forum, Councillors should refer to other Councillors, officials of the Council and members of the public courteously.
13. 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.
14. Councillors should avoid commenting on decisions taken by the Council but see point 15 below.
15. Councillors should refrain from engaging in debate, particularly with anonymous posters. However, if a thread relating to the work of the Parish Council seems to be ill-informed, they may offer factual corrections, provide relevant background or explain the reason for decisions taken by the Council. In contentious cases they may wish to consult other Councillors before posting.
16. Councillors must not post on the Forum anything which they have been given or told in confidence.
17. Councillors are not to use the Forum (or any facilities provided at the expense of the Parish Council) to campaign for election.

**Staplehurst Parish Council**  
**16<sup>th</sup> September 2013**