1.0 Introduction

1.1 Social media is a generic term for the electronic sharing of opinions, discussions, stories, video, pictures, information and even gossip. It can be categorised into six types: blogs; wikis; social networks; forums; podcasts; and content communities. The key feature of such systems is that they 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.

1.2 Social media has the following characteristics:

- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of device; PCs, phones and tablets (e.g. iPad)
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
- Lets communication take place in real time or intermittently

1.3 Whilst these tools are very useful to enable the sharing of 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. In many cases registration to view the content may not be necessary. Registering may only be required should participation and posting to a site be allowed.
- Groups on specific themes can be 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 all too easy to respond without thinking and potentially inflaming a situation. Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience.
- It is also very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

2.0 Aims and Objectives of the use of Social Media

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

2.2 As with all forms of communication, a strategy is helpful to ensure fair use, promote willing compliance and ensure corporate responsibility. The aims of a Social Media strategy should ensure:

- Engagement with individuals and communities and the successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media;
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained;
- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through such use;
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation; and
- That the Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

2.3   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 plugged in to social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

4.0   Policy Statement

3.1   It is acknowledged that there is significant potential in social media and that this can bring great advantages. The responsible, corporate use, of social media is growing and the following can be applied equally to Officers and Members.

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

3.3   Council users must use social media sensibly and responsibly, and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the council or its business, nor be damaging to its reputation and credibility or otherwise conflict with any internal policies.

3.4   The following guidelines should be applied to online participation and sets out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of Kirton in Lindsey Town Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy;
- Remember that you are responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media;
- Never give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with Council policy and the Data Protection Act.
- Individual councillors using social media for the purposes of their role should use a disclaimer. In such circumstances councillors must not imply they are speaking for their Council. They should avoid use of a council e-mail address, logos or other council identification and make it clear that what they say is representative of their personal views only. Where possible, they should include a standard disclaimer, such as: "Statements and opinions here are my own and do not necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions".
- Everyone must be conscious of their obligations and should comply with other relevant council policies when using social media. For example, they should be careful not to breach Council confidentiality and proprietary information policies. For councillors this could be a Code of Conduct issue, for employees it could be a disciplinary matter.

- Respect must be shown to all. Council users should be respectful of the authority, its members and its employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong and can have repercussions.

4.0 Responsibilities

4.1 Initially a Council will usually establish a preferred medium in order to quickly disseminate information and/or create interest. The Clerk will be the designated Council owner of any feed or other Social Media channel. It must be acknowledged that new activities of any kind have resource implications and badly engaging with social media will not be helpful.

4.2 Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts and they should ensure they comply with the Council's Policy statement.

5.0 Guidance for Councillors - *social media and meetings*

5.1 Councillors should keep residents informed of local issues and the use of social media can help with this. It has been known for councillors to use social media during meetings. Councillors will wish to bear in mind the purpose of Council meetings and the expectations of the public in terms of their representatives attentively listening to and participating in debates and decision-making. Councillors will therefore be conscious of the possible public perception created by the use of social media during meetings. That having been said, effective and timely communication following a meeting will be of great interest to those who follow council business.

5.2 Below are some extra guidelines for councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:

- Standing Orders may allow the use of handheld devices and laptops during meetings however the use of such devices should have the intention of improving communication, not of interrupting or distracting anyone taking part. If the Council's Standing Orders prohibit the use of electronic devices during a meeting, that must be respected;
- Any tweets/blogs which are allowed during Council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting - tweeting/blogging about other subjects will serve only to show the public and other attendees that there is a lack of engagement with Council business;
- 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. The public attending meetings expect debate and to be informed about Council business, not to witness petty arguments; and
- If a councillor breaks the law whilst using social media (for example by posting something (defamatory), he or she will be personally responsible.

6.0 Measuring the success of engaging using social media

6.1 A Council will be interested in measures of engagement. This can be determined by the number of followers, subscribers, re-posts and likes, e.g. Facebook and Twitter can provide these statistics. There are sustainability factors to consider. The potential environmental and sustainability implications of social media have to be considered. It might be 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 potential scope for more open communication, increased ability to share information and even improved service delivery.

6.2   The cost-effectiveness of this form of media may be difficult to quantify over time. Certainly, at the outset, it may be a cost-consumer. Usage in the form of followers etc may therefore be a key measurement of success.

Facebook Strategy

7.3   Facebook offers a platform allowing the Council to share 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 visitors
- Share positive product reviews / client testimonials
- Upload product images and videos
- Competitions
- Generic news – what's happening in the area

7.4   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. Friends will gain access to the Council's network of contacts on the site.

7.5   There is nothing to stop Councillors setting up their own Facebook pages, but in doing so they will have to accept sole responsibility for the maintenance of those pages and will be personally responsible for ensuring that it complies with legislation and they should follow any specific local guidance issued by their Council.

7.6   Listed in this section are some good practice guidelines for a Council follow, which any Councillor using Facebook should also follow:

- A Council has a professional and public image to uphold and how it communicates electronically impacts this image;
- It must be remembered that people classified as "friends" have the ability to download and share your information with others;
- The only information that should be posted is that which the Council or Councillor wants the world to see. It is not like posting something to a web site or a blog and then realizing that it should be changed or removed. On a social networking site, once something is posted, it may continue to be available, even after it is removed from the site;
- Confidential matters cannot be disclosed and individuals should not be criticised;
- Profile security and privacy settings should be set carefully.   As 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;
- Only add "official" Council statements after they have been issued using your council's agreed policy;

- Acknowledge queries posted to the Council on the Facebook site publicly but respond privately in message form;
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libellous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterisations;
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness as a Council or a Councillor 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 which provide 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; and
- Be informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

Twitter Strategy

7.7 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 like-minded 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; and
- Offer relevant Q&A sessions

7.8 People following the Council could expect tweets covering some or all of the following:

- Updates on Council activities;
- Announcements about matters of importance to residents and to those who may be visiting or moving to the town;
- Requests for information and assistance including invitations to tender for Council services; and
- News about our online facilities.

7.9 Most Councils are unable to monitor Twitter around the clock. However it should endeavour to answer all sensible tweeted questions within an agreed timescale.

7.10 Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts and the following key questions may be of assistance:
- What do the readers really want to know?

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

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

8.0   Blog Strategy:

8.1   Blogs form the backbone to most social content. They provide the perfect opportunity to share relevant content. Example activity:

- Deliver a weekly blog post – a mix of advice, council news and guides;
- Include imagery
- Encourage comments – ask the reader questions or for their opinion on the subject.

8.2   Given the amount of time required to populate and maintain a blog, many Councils may struggle with this approach. Councillors are at liberty to create their own personal blog sites however they should be made aware that the software platform used for the web site, Wordpress, can be used to blog and therefore could be used to allow comments to be made about certain articles that appear on the web site. The default should always be to switch off comments.

2.0   Council Use of Social Media

2.1   A Council can make use of these tools to quickly disseminate information but should carefully control their use in order to minimise the risks as stated above. Many councils opt only to use one medium with its use limited to providing information on Council activities.

2.2   Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and they should not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view.

2.3   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.

2.4   The following statutes have a bearing on, or impinge on the rationale of, Social Media as far as the Council is concerned:

- Data Protection Act 1998
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Human Rights Act 1998