

## **YATTON PARISH COUNCIL**

**Finance, Personnel & Administration Committee, 14 February 2011**

### **Agenda item 9: Social networking strategy**

#### **Report of the Clerk**

1. This report asks members to consider ways of improving communication and community engagement through the use of social networking.

#### **The current communications strategy**

2. Historically the Parish Council has made its regular communications by means of documents posted on its noticeboards and press releases. For the last few years the Parish Council like most other organisations has had a website on which notices of interest are posted.

3. Noticeboards remain an effective way of communicating some material, and local papers are still read, but most people nowadays, especially younger people, expect to get information electronically. The current website is well used, and has a 'Contact Us' page to enable people to contact the Parish Council. It has two main disadvantages:

- It can only communicate information when people take the decision to look at it, and
- It is not an effective forum for debate, being essentially 'one-way' communication.

4. The use of the two most popular social networking tools, Twitter and Facebook, can help to overcome these disadvantages. Twitter and Facebook are both free and are both extensively used by local authorities, including many parish and town councils. Members might care to look at the use of Twitter and Facebook by North Somerset Council at [www.n-somerset.gov.uk](http://www.n-somerset.gov.uk) (you need to be a Facebook user to look at Facebook pages).

#### **Twitter**

5. Twitter is a means of communicating small amounts of information quickly and regularly. Messages sent on Twitter are called 'tweets' and cannot be more than 140 characters. However they can include a hyperlink to a webpage or online document with more detail. Twitter has around 190 million users worldwide.

6. Tweets are public, just like a webpage. However the great advantage of Twitter is that one user can become a 'follower' of another user. All your Twitter followers are automatically alerted to your tweets, often via their mobile phones.

This means that all your followers will know about your communication as soon as you make it, and will not have to take an active decision to visit your webpage. Your followers could be local residents, community groups, government departments and other local authorities.

7. The slight disadvantage of Twitter is that it requires a regular supply of tweets to maintain the interest of your followers (and indeed some users tweet so often as to appear slightly manic). However I usually find something new to put on the website each day so I would expect to be tweeting regularly.

## **Facebook**

8. Facebook is both a way of communicating information and a way of having conversations. Every user has a page, or rather a number of pages, with information about the user, photographs and a 'wall'. It is the wall that is the key to communication. The wall can be used as a conventional webpage for the user to post news. However the distinguishing feature of the wall is that other people, your Facebook 'friends', can post on it. This enables it to be used as a means of debate and dialogue. The wall can be visible to everyone, or only to friends. Facebook has at least 600 million users worldwide.

9. Requests to be your Facebook friend must be approved by the user, and only friends can post on your wall. However for Facebook to work effectively for organisations you would expect to approve friend requests, certainly from anyone with a local connection.

10. Once someone is your Facebook friend they can post anything on your wall, at any time of day or night. There is therefore a risk that inappropriate posts will appear. Other clerks do not seem to have found this a big problem. Any friend who posts inappropriately can be 'unfriended' so that they can no longer post. In extreme cases they can be reported to Facebook administration and their account may be closed down. To minimise the risk it is important that someone keeps an eye on the wall and ensures that any inappropriate posts are removed.

11. Other councils have found Facebook useful when there is scope for genuine debate. Examples in Yatton could be the redevelopment of Hangstones pavilion or the search for sites for affordable housing. Obviously some posts will be critical of the council but the interactive nature of Facebook means that a public response can be made very quickly.

I RECOMMEND that I report back to the next meeting of the Committee with drafts of Twitter and Facebook pages.