

Social Media Guidance for Members

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1. Purpose of this Guidance

- 1.1. Effective communication is at the heart of success for any councillor. Over recent years social media has transformed how elected representatives communicate with their communities. There are many key benefits to using social media as a councillor and it is recognised that there is a range of ability and frequency of use of social media as a communication tool by councillors. Using social media, in particular highly used platforms like Facebook, enables councillors to engage regularly with many residents across all age groups and demographics including residents who are much less likely to read leaflets or attend council meetings.
- 1.2. This guidance is intended to provide support for councillors in utilising social media and complements the general rules under the Code of Conduct for Members. This guidance provides advice on how to stay safe and secure online, how to use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with corporate policy. The guidance sets out the potential risks and benefits of social media usage and gives some practical tips to ensure councillors don't fall foul of any legal or security issues.

2. What is Social Media?

- 2.1 Social media is the term to describe websites and online tools which allow people to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This could, for example, be blogs, and postings on a wide range of social media platforms including (but not limited to) Facebook, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Instagram etc.
- 2.2 Used well, social media can enable councillors to provide up to date information to residents and communities in a cost-effective way. It can help them:
 - i. Promote the work they are doing to a variety of audiences.
 - ii. Promote the work of the council to a variety of audiences.
 - iii. Engage with residents, businesses and community groups.
 - iv. Listen to conversations and issues going on in their local area.
- 2.3 There are many social media platforms available to use and different social media platforms enable councillors to communicate with different members of the community. Instagram is focused on images and engagements with the images. Facebook remains one of the widest reaching platforms for councillors and it is recommended as the best place to start with social media.
- 2.4 As a councillor, you need to use your time effectively – you're a busy person! The Local Government Association advice is to start by prioritising one key social media platform and become confident and impactful on it before deciding to move on to others.

3. Keeping you safe

- 3.1 Make sure if you are using social media that you use secure log in details, don't use your councillor email for example as this may be well known.
- 3.2 Make sure you maintain a divide between your personal and family life and your public profile. If you post material to your councillor page, even if it is private, you could be seen to be acting as a councillor and the Code of Conduct will apply.

- 3.3 Ensure appropriate privacy settings are applied to whichever platform you choose to use.
- 3.4 Be aware that councillors are personally responsible for any content they publish on any form. It is highly recommended that you don't post or share anything online that you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.
- 3.5 Content on social media is available for a long time. Even if you delete it, someone could have easily screenshot it or used it elsewhere. As a councillor, you need to think carefully about what and how much content you put in the public domain.
- 3.6 Don't share your personal details online such as your phone number or personal photos with family members or friends. Whilst you might be comfortable being in the public glare, consider whether your family, friends, work colleagues or neighbours would be as comfortable.
- 3.7 As with emails you need to be alert to phishing scams, cons or malicious software.
- 3.8 Beware of those who seek to use social media in a negative or abusive way, sometimes referred to as "trolls". The best advice is not to respond to such individuals and consider deleting or hiding their comments.
- 3.9 Do not be afraid to block followers or individuals who are persistently abusive to you. You should also consider reporting such conduct to the police. Similarly, where offensive content is posted by others, you should delete it and report it.
- 3.10 Where you are posting photographs you have taken on social media you should ensure that you have appropriate consents of people who may be featured in the image to ensure you are not disclosing personal data of others and that images are used appropriately.

4. Responsibilities of Councillors

- 4.1 There's a golden rule for using social media, which is: if you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first before doing anything else. The Council's Communications and Engagement team and/or Legal team can offer advice and support.

Social media works in the public domain. Once something is published it is 'out there' for everyone to see and very easily it can:

- go viral,
- be altered or changed without your consent,
- be taken out of context or
- be shared around the world.

Using social media as an elected (or co-opted) member of a council is very different from using it as someone who isn't. Councillors have additional responsibilities because of their position.

- 4.2 Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a councillor will not prevent someone else pursuing

legal action following the publication of an untrue statement. In such a situation, it is likely that you will be held personally liable. No indemnity from the Council will be available. This could include 'liking' or sharing someone else's content publicly as this could be viewed as endorsement.

- 4.3 Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion. They also play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation. Think twice before you press 'share'. If using Artificial Intelligence in the creation of posts, care should be taken to still ensure that the contents are accurate and in context.
- 4.4 As a councillor you are a representation of your office and your Council. Care should be taken when posting about Council business to ensure it is an accurate account and does not risk bringing your office or the Council into disrepute.
- 4.5 Be careful about your "friends" on social media, you shouldn't request or accept a Council employee or contractor providing services to the council as a "friend" on a social networking site where this suggests close personal association. For the avoidance of doubt, this does not apply to sites which are intended as a neutral, professional connections registry (such as LinkedIn) or to sites where there are no privacy restrictions and anyone can effectively view content. As a councillor, you need to be aware of the perception of bias or special treatment.
- 4.6 As a councillor you are in a position of authority. When posting comments on social media you must ensure they are respectful and that the platform is not used in any way to attack, insult, abuse, defame or otherwise make negative, offensive or discriminatory comments about Council staff, service users, their family or friends, colleagues, other professionals, other organisations, other councillors or the Council.
- 4.7 Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business – if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.
- 4.8. Be careful not to give the impression that your personal website or social media account is an official Council website or account, for example by misleading use of the Council's logo. It is however acceptable to share the Council's public social media content through your own social media account/s.
- 4.9 On social media, councillors should also keep in mind their responsibility in relation to confidential information, copyright, data protection, the pre-election period and exempt reports.
- 4.10 Councillors are still subject to the Code of Conduct on social media where there is an explicit link between the content posted and Council business or your role as councillor. As a general rule, councillors should demonstrate good conduct at all times and so should act as though their public engagement on social media falls in scope of the Code of Conduct.
- 4.11 When posting to social media you should remember that:
 - you are an elected representative of your Council;
 - what you post can affect the reputation of your Council;
 - your Council is a corporate decision-making body – you can't, independently, make decisions for the council on social media;

- some issues and communications are best left to your Council's official social media channels, which are usually managed by officers;
- having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations – for example, in the event of major flooding;
- you don't have to respond to or comment on everything on social media – and sometimes it's best not to.

Think before you press 'publish'! There is a simple test. If you would be reluctant to say something face-to-face to a group of strangers in the street, then you probably shouldn't say it on social media.

5. Relevant Elements of the Members' Code of Conduct:

- 5.1 Where you are posting on a councillor social media platform or sometimes even if you are posting on a private platform about Council business, the Code of Conduct will be engaged. The following sections of the Code are relevant:
- 5.2 You must treat others with respect - do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments.
- 5.3 You must comply with equality laws – do not publish anything that might be seen as discriminatory against any protected characteristic.
- 5.4 You must not bully or harass anyone – do not say anything, particularly if it is part of a series of similar comments about a person or on a theme that might be construed as bullying or intimidation.
- 5.5 You must not bring your office or the Council into disrepute – you should not publish anything that could reasonably be perceived as reflecting badly upon or lowering the reputation of you or the Council.
- 5.6 You must not disclose confidential information - you must not, in your use of social media, just as in any other circumstances, disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone, or information acquired by you which you believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature. Inadvertent leaks of the Council's confidential information are more likely to take place when a councillor is using social media, rather than, say, when they are carefully drafting a letter for publication in the local paper. This may be because of the more immediate, conversational, off-the-cuff nature of much social media communication. Members must be careful to apply exactly the same standards to their social media communications as they would to statements made in a more formal context.

6. General

- 6.1 The Council wishes to encourage Members' use of technology including social media for effective communication. This guidance is intended to help Members use social media in a way that avoids legal and reputational risk. Councillors are required to engage with any training provided by the Council on use of social media.

7. Advice

The Council endorses the [Local Government Association's Social media](#)

[guidance for councillors](#) and requires all councillors to use it if they choose to engage on social media. The guidance has been incorporated into this document. Further guidance can also be accessed.

The Communications and Engagement team or the Legal team (legalservices@gedling.gov.uk) are happy to help Members by providing additional advice and guidance as appropriate.

