

Cardiff Council

Social Media Guidance for Councillors

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Section 1

Introduction – Why Social Media is Important

People are now turning first to the web to find everything from information and entertainment to shopping and making connections with friends and colleagues. People expect to be able to comment and contribute on everything; from online versions of newspapers to items they purchase from retailers.

Residents will increasingly expect that local government will be able to provide its services online, with the same level of interactivity that they find everywhere else. It wasn't that long ago that email was a novel way to contact your Councillor and Council. Already many Councillors and Councils are interacting with the people they represent online through social media, and it won't be long before this is common expectation.¹

However, there are challenges that may discourage Councillors and the Council from engaging in social media use. For example, inappropriate use (which may occur inadvertently) can cause significant damage to a Councillor's (or even the Council's) reputation and can lead to legal claims. In addition the technology involved is changing at a fast pace. This can mean that it is hard to keep up and maintain useful interaction with residents.

The problem for Councils though, is that not engaging now represents a far greater risk than engaging. Citizens will still use these networks to talk about us, whether we add our voice to the conversation or not. The national infrastructures being built to improve government and public services will still exist, and Councils will be expected to engage with them. Citizens will expect their council to engage with them on their terms, via their channels, and to be openly available online. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that if councils don't use these tools, the citizens will do it for them, and bypass the council entirely.²

In response to these new opportunities and challenges this handbook is intended to:

- Introduce various forms of social media;
- Give guidance in relation to the basic use of social media by Councillors;
- Highlight sections of the Members' Code of Conduct that relate to the use of social media; and
- Provide guidance in relation to the use of social media by Councillors and to highlight some of the pitfalls to be aware of.

The Members Code of Conduct

It is vital to remember that Members must follow the Code of Conduct at all times. This includes your online activities – there are many aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct that will apply to your online activities in the same way it does to your offline life.

Why should and how can Social Media be used?

¹ Extracted from 'Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' LGA

² Extracted from 'Local by Social – how Local Authorities can use social media to achieve more for less' I&DeA

The Home Office has produced a guide on the use of social media and highlights the following uses and benefits of social media:³

Communicate with citizens where they are

Many of Cardiff's citizens are already on social media, and expect to find you there too. Britons are the most prolific social networkers in Europe, with over 50% of the UK population now using Facebook. For many, it's already the place to go for debate, information and to find contact information.

However, the use of social media is not simply a numbers game. The quality of interaction and audience demographics should influence your choice of how and when to use social media. It's also important to know who is using different channels so you can better target your audience.

It's also important to remember that despite the growth of social media, many citizens are not on social media and likely never will be so traditional methods of communication should not be abandoned!

Consult and engage

Social media can be a great way to disseminate or gather information to many people quickly and cheaply. This could include asking questions to crowd-source views, but also something as simple as raising awareness of roundtables and consultation events.

Social media can be used to have discussions with service users or the people whose behaviour you want to change. Social media is one of the few ways you can directly and instantly receive feedback on your policies and decisions

Increase the impact of your communications

Most social media users will testify to the fact that you will get far greater traction with your audience if you add a social media layer to your communications - whether in an emergency, for one-off or more regular events.

Buzz generated around communications on Twitter can very quickly escalate. Stories and discussions start on Twitter but are quickly picked up, firstly by amateur bloggers, then by professional bloggers, then via news websites and often make it onto the front pages of newspapers 12-24 hours later. You have a real chance to either reinforce or prevent those front-page headlines with the effective use of social media.

Also, communicating 1-to-many rather than repeatedly 1-to-1 directly, quickly and cheaply is one of the major opportunities that social media offers.

³ Based on extracts from 'Social Media Guidance for Civil Servants' Home Office

Be more transparent and accountable

Explaining what Council and Councillors do (and why and how they do it) is already embedded in our culture through the use of public meetings, consultations and the publication of information online and in hard copy. Social media can add a further level of transparency and accountability to the public.

It allows citizens to input into decisions, to question them and for replies to be broadcast to many instead of 1-2-1. So you can hear direct from those affected by your decisions – the positive and negative – and explain and/or defend decisions.

Be part of the conversation

Most commentators will agree that there is more value to be gained from engaging in the social media conversation than not - whether you are aiming for better service delivery or behaviour change. Being present in the conversation means engaging and a core part of any good conversation is listening.

If you are not aware of rumours circulating within a particular citizen group who use a particular service regularly, you cannot address that rumour. But if you are, you can respond there quickly and easily.

To bring people together

Using social media can be a great way to connect with individuals and organisations who want the same things as you do. Social media is a quick, easy and effective way to network. Bringing together like minded people can have a multitude of benefits and have a real impact on the quality of services offered by the Council.

Section 2

Social Media – an Introduction

Social media describes a range of online services that provide easy ways to create and publish on the internet. People generally use the term to describe how content (i.e. text, video and pictures) can be shared and discussed online.

It is transforming the way that business is done and how individuals interact with each other. It is providing a voice for those who might otherwise struggle to get a platform. As a result social media will change the way that councillors and councils interact with local people.

A lot of the language used can initially seem like impenetrable jargon. However, the important thing to remember about social media is that it's social. It's about communication. It's about putting the transformative power of the printing press into the hands of the people. Just like the ability to publish political pamphlets and talk about them in public was the foundation of our democracy, social media will have just as big an effect on the way we govern and do business.

Now anyone can publish and share their views, and more importantly can engage in conversation with others about those views, with just a few clicks of a mouse. It's the political leaflet and public meeting all rolled into one.⁴

Types of Social Media

It's impossible to list all the types of social media, but the following is a very brief summary of the main popular social media platforms commonly used at the moment:

- Facebook – this is a service mainly used for telling people what you like and what you've done.
- Twitter – for telling people what your doing or thinking – right now!
- Instagram and Flickr – both for showing people your pictures.
- Foursquare – for telling people where you are.
- You Tube – for showing people your videos.
- Linked In – for professional networking.

⁴ Based on material in 'Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' by the Local Government Association.

Section 3

Staying out of trouble on Social Media⁵

Any form of communication is rife with the possibility of misunderstandings. But Social media is especially vulnerable to this risk. For example, it's very difficult to convey irony in the 140 characters of a Twitter post. So a comment that would be seen as harmlessly humorous in normal conversation could be seen as seriously offensive on Twitter.

The serious legal bits and actual guidelines are at the end of this section and you should read and make sure you understand these. However, the following is intended to be a more practical guide to ensuring you stay on the straight and narrow when using social media. As a general rule, all of the below will seem like common sense – and a lot of it is.

Don't rush in!

The problems that arise from social media often stem from users forgetting two key characteristics of social media:

1. What you are saying is **permanently published, to the world** – once you say something online, it's nearly impossible to take it back. Before you know it, the off-hand comment you made when you were angry could have gone global. As it's attributed to you, your name (and that of the Council or your party if you are a Councillor) could be forever tarnished.
2. You're just using text or pictures and people reading or viewing them may not be aware of the background to the issue you're discussing. Because of this **posts can easily be misinterpreted or taken out of context**. Yes, social media is interactive, but not in the same way as a face to face conversation. Therefore, an ambiguous comment may have already done its damage before you realise it and get the chance to explain what you really meant.

Be secure

Officers of the Council and Councillors, just like anyone else, should be careful about internet security. If you lose control of a social media account to a hacker, you could suddenly find all sorts of inappropriate comments being published to the world in your name!

Use secure passwords (generally over eight characters long and using a mix of letters, numbers and symbols) and never share your password with anyone. If you are using shared IT equipment, don't store your password on the computer.

Allow disagreement but don't get into arguments

As you begin to use social media, you'll find that there are some argumentative users out there. You need to be aware that getting into an online argument rarely results in either party looking good.

⁵ This section adapts and adds to principles from the LGA publication "Connected Councillors – a guide to using social media to support local leadership".

Some comments may be out of line, but on the other hand deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will often backfire. You can't stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, and then linking back to your site and saying you are "gagging" those who disagree with you. It's best not to get bogged down. You don't have to respond to everything – it's OK to ignore comments if necessary.

It's also worth bearing in mind that people will have a lot more confidence to say things behind the protection of their keyboard than they would in a face-to-face conversation. So you'll probably need to have an even thicker skin than normal!

Moderate your account

You will need to take note of the comments that other people make. It may be a fine line to tread, but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand then it can put off other members of the community. The easiest way to handle this is to "moderate" comments.

The process of moderation involves identifying, deleting or reporting comments or content that is inappropriate. If you do so, it's best to clearly set out somewhere on your account the reasons why comments may be rejected.

A couple of sample Moderation Policies can be found here:

The BBC's very detailed Moderation Policy -
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/4176520.stm>

Welsh Government's shorter Moderation Policy –
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/tourism/workingtourismind1/socialmediause/?lang=en>

For Facebook or other social networks, including multi-media sites like YouTube and Flickr where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to regularly check on messages or, far less preferably, disable message posting. It is worth noting that you cannot moderate Twitter as such but you can 'block people' who are posting inappropriate comments or report them to Twitter.

Think about who you contact and engage with

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'friending' can imply an intimacy or support that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information.

Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people may find it obtrusive if their council or councillor begins following them online. It's probably best to let other people initiate online contact with you, and then to respond rather than actively trying to "friend" or otherwise make contact with residents.

Most social media platforms restrict or limit use by minors, however these rules are hard to monitor and are therefore often breached. You should be very careful about contacting, 'liking', or 'friending' those who are or appear to be under the age of 18. If you have any doubt at all about whether it's appropriate to engage in any sort of online contact with a minor, it's probably best to err on the side of caution.

Equally, you should be aware that creating a social media account rarely involves any checks on identity. Therefore, people may not always be who they say they are.

Beware the irony

Very few writers are able to communicate sarcasm or irony well through short online messages. It's probably best to assume that you're among the vast majority who can't.

Own up

Social media is great at transparency. The best users admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't normally possible anyway).

Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake – perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a post – shows you are not pretending it didn't happen, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

Legal considerations⁶

This section does not purport to be a complete assessment of all the legal pitfalls that may catch out a social media user, but it highlights some of the main concerns. If you have any questions or concerns in relation to a particular issue please contact the Council's legal services team.

It's worth remembering that most of these pitfalls can be avoided if you make sure that everything you say online is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it.

A successful libel claim may result in an award of damages.

Copyright

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without first seeking proper permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance.

Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages.

⁶ This section is adapted from CivicSurf's Legal Guidance for councillor blogs. Included here under Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial license.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

In addition, some information that you receive in your role as a Councillor will be confidential. Obviously, this sort of material should not be published online.

Further guidance can be sought from the Council's Improvement & Information Management Team or Monitoring Officer.

Obscene or offensive material

It goes without saying that you should avoid publishing anything that people would consider obscene or offensive. Publication of obscene material (and some types of offensive material) is a criminal offence.

The Council's use of Social Media

Material published by the Council itself is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not:

- contain party political material;
- persuade the public to a particular political view;
- promote the personal image of a particular councillor or party; or
- promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues.

In addition, the Council should not assist (such as by re-tweeting) in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

What does the Council consider to be inappropriate or offensive?

The Council will not tolerate inappropriate or offensive use of social media and will take action against anyone found to have made any such comments. For Councillors, this could result in comments being reported to the Standards & Ethics Committee or the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

It's impossible to write a list of everything that could be seen as inappropriate or offensive. Below is a list of examples of the type of comment or material that might fall into this category, but you should be aware that this is not an exhaustive list.

You should not use social media in a way that:

- is illegal;
- breaches confidentiality, for example by:
 - revealing confidential or commercially sensitive information belonging to the Council;

- giving away personal or confidential information about an individual (such as a fellow Councillor, officer or a service user) or organisation (such as a service provider or partner authority); or
- improperly discussing the Council's internal workings (such as agreements that it is reaching or its future plans that have not been communicated to the public) or;
- does anything that could be reasonably considered insulting, threatening, discriminatory against, or bullying or harassment of, any individual, for example by:
 - making offensive or derogatory comments (in particular in relation to any of the Protected Characteristics contained in the Equality Act 2010, being: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy, race, religion or belief, gender or sexual orientation);;
 - using social media to bully another individual (such as an officer or service user of the Council); or
 - posting images or comments that are offensive, obscene or links to such content or;
- brings the Council into disrepute, for example by:
 - making defamatory comments about the Council, officers, individuals, organisations or groups;
 - promotes illegal activity or is intended to deceive; or
- breaches copyright, for example by:
 - using someone else's images or written content without permission; or
 - failing to give acknowledgement where permission has been given to reproduce something.

If you have any doubt at all about whether content is appropriate, it probably isn't! If you are still in any doubt, you should contact the Council's Monitoring Officer before posting.

Section 4

Social Media Issues that are Specific to Councillors

As you get started in social media and build your online profile, there are a few things to bear in mind. While there's no additional legal or ethical burden around using social media, the usual rules still apply and you need to think about them in this new context.

In the main, Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using social media websites for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning, licencing and other regulatory matters.

Use of social media by members of planning, licensing or other regulatory committees is not permitted during the course of such meetings.

This section looks at some issues that are particularly relevant to the life and work of a Councillor and builds on the principles set out in Section 3.

Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything online that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining.

If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalid.

Interaction with Councillors by the Council Online

Whilst it is important to remember the principles set out in this guide in relation to the Council itself not promoting political views, the Council must acknowledge that social media channels are now used for communication and finding information by many residents. Therefore, Council materials may make reference to the social media accounts of Councillors as a means of contacting that Councillor.

Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk. In particular you should also read the useful guidance that can be found here: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents

The Members' Code of Conduct⁷

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake.

⁷ This section is adapted from CivicSurf's Legal Guidance for councillor blogs. Included here under Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial license.

The nature of a Councillor's hours and work on local issues may mean that the line between work life and home life is not always clear. Councillors can have 'blurred identities'. This means you may have a social media account where you comment both as a Councillor and as an individual. For example a Facebook account where you've posted about a great night out (personal) and another time explained the Council position on pothole repair (Councillor). It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a Councillor, but it could be less clear to others.

Whilst there are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line, it is worth assuming that any online activity can be linked to your official role. This is because the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will most likely be taken by someone else. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

As a result the Council's Standards and Ethics Committee strongly recommends that Councillors separate their social media use. **The Committee recommends using separate social media accounts for Council and private business.** Whilst this will not always protect comments that you intended to be "private", it will help to keep your identities separate; and reduce the risk of a comment you intended to be private as being viewed as having been made in a public capacity.

Such blurred identities might also have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is a need therefore to get your position on social media accounts/profiles clear so that it cannot be misinterpreted that you are acting as the corporate voice for the Council. Indeed, there is an important difference between communicating on behalf of the Council, or as a Councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter.

With this latter point in mind, you need to be aware that how you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. The key, however, to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a Councillor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

As has already been mentioned, aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake. Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- Treat others with respect. Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.

- Comply with equality laws.
- Refrain from publishing anything you have received in confidence.
- Ensure you don't bring the Council, or your Councillor role, into disrepute.

If you have any doubt about any online issues, please contact the Monitoring Officer.

“Although these warnings may seem stark, they shouldn't put you off engaging online. Use your common sense. The things that can get you in hot water anywhere else are the same things to avoid in social media. Most councillors who are using social media engage with citizens in entirely constructive and often colourful fashions without ever engaging the Code of Conduct or running foul of the law”⁸

⁸ Connected Councillors, Social Media Handbook.

Section 5

References to other relevant Council Policies, Acknowledgements and Further Materials

Further Reading Materials

You may also wish to look at:

- Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' Local Government Association
- Local by Social – how Local Authorities can use social media to achieve more for less' Improvement and Development Agency
- CivicSurf's website: www.civicsurf.org.uk
- The Local Government Associations webpages on Social Media: <http://www.local.gov.uk/socialmedia>

Other Council Policies

These Council's IT policies are also relevant: They can be found here: http://cmsweb/cardiff/content.asp?nav=3011%2C4058%2C4062%2C4069&parent_directory_id=3094

Acknowledgements

Material in this Policy has been based on and/or reproduced with thanks from the following publications:

- Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership' Local Government Association
- Local by Social – how Local Authorities can use social media to achieve more for less' Improvement and Development Agency
- CivicSurf's Legal Guidance for councillor blogs. Included here under Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial license
- Social Media policies in use by other Local Authorities including Cheshire East, Lincolnshire and Devon
- Social media guidance for civil servants. Published by the Cabinet and Home Offices and reproduced under the terms of the Open Government Licence