Standards Committee

Local Government Association "Debate Not Hate" Campaign and Social Media Toolkit Review

17th March 2023

Report of Legal and Democratic Services

Helen Lynch, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Monitoring Officer

Electoral division(s) affected:

None

Purpose of the Report

1   To inform Members of any developments in relation to the Local Government Association (LGA)'s Debate Not Hate campaign.

Executive summary

2   The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in their communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.

3   Following the recommendation made by the Committee on 5 December 2022, a report on the Debate was presented to Full Council on 25 January 2023.

4   Council agreed that the Leader of the Council would sign the public statement on behalf of the County Council, and this has since been done. Additionally, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services was asked to circulate the Public Statement to all Members in order for them to sign it individually. A number of Councillors have confirmed that they have signed the statement.

5   At the Standards Committee meeting on 5 December 2022, the Committee were advised that the Civility and Respect Working Group had published updated Social Media Guidance. The Committee requested that Officers review this guidance alongside the Council's Social Media Toolkit to ensure that the Toolkit reflects best practice, particularly in relation to civility and respect. Following the review, proposed changes to the Durham County Council Social Media Toolkit for Members are outlined within this report.

Recommendation(s)

6   The Standards Committee is asked to:

a) Note the Report.

b) Agree that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services submits a case study to the LGA in consultation with the Chair of the Standards Committee.

c) Request that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services circulate the Councillors Guide to handling harassment and abuse and intimidation and make it available on the Members portal.

d) Agree that the Social Media Toolkit is amened to incorporate the recommendations from the 'Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media'.

e) Request that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services circulate a link to the revised Social Media Toolkit once it has been updated.

Background

7   The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in their communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.

8   At its meeting on 5 December 2022, the Committee agreed to add the campaign to its work programme so that it could monitor its progress and where appropriate participate in campaign activity and consider actions to be taken by the Council arising out of the campaign.

Supporting Councillors with abuse workshop

9   Since the last meeting of the Committee, the LGA invited the Monitoring Officer to participate in an online Workshop which discussed how Local Authorities can support Councillors who are facing abuse.

10   The webinar covered the supporting Councillors with abuse Project which aims to consider what Councils currently do to support their Members, and to better navigate the issue. The project focuses on three main areas when looking to support Councillors who are facing abuse:

- Prevention and support

- Incident management

- Aftercare and wellbeing

11   Discussions took place between those in attendance in which they shared their authority's strategies for supporting Councillors. The Officer attending on behalf of the Council shared the support that the Council provides to members experiencing abuse and intimidation. She also shared that the Council has good working relationships with Durham Constabulary and encourages Members to report any incidents of abuse, as the police are responsive to concerns which are raised with them.

12   The Workshop also covered what councils could do to support Councillors when a threatening incident occurs. Some solutions which were suggested by the group were:

- Offering a welfare buddy scheme

- Report incidents of abuse to the Police

- Offer access to employee assistance schemes

- Granting Members permission to disengage – some feel they can't because of their roles

- Redacting home address off website which is an issue which the Debate Not Hate Campaign seeks to address through Legislative changes.

- Raising awareness with the Public and Staff about the abuse of Councillors.

13   The workshop also covered the Civility and Respect programme, which produced the Social Media guidance detailed in this report. The project has also developed training programmes and lobbying for changes in legislation which may help to protect Councillors amongst other developments.

14   Following the Officer's attendance at the Webinar, they were approached by an advisor at the LGA who requested the Durham provide a case study covering the involvement of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services in handling reports of abuse and intimidation and the Council's relationship with the police.

15   It is proposed that in Consultation with the Chair of the Standards Committee, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services will submit a case study to be used by the LGA.

16   As part of the campaign, the LGA has recently published some guidance titled 'Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse, and intimidation.' The guidance is intended to provide further steps that can be taken by Councillors and Councils to protect Councillors.

17   The guidance recognises that the increased concern regarding abuse and intimidation aimed at Councillors in a public position often discourages others from standing or standing again for election. The LGA aim to encourage more people to stand for election, to create room for more diversity within these public positions.

18   The topics within this guidance are;

 (i)   Definition of harassment, abuse, and intimidation.

 (ii)   General advice for handling abuse and intimidation.

 (iii) Practical advice for handling online abuse.

 (iv) Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security.

(v)   Practical advice for handling psychological abuse and impact on wellbeing.

(vi)   What legal support is there?

(vii)   Advice for supporting Councillors

(viii) Basics on communicating with residents, colleagues, and officers

(ix)   Further resources.

19   A copy of the guidance is appended to the report at Appendix 2. It is proposed that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services will circulate the guidance to all Members and arrange for it to be available on the Members portal.

20   In response to growing concerns about the impact of abuse, intimidation, and harassment has on Councillors, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), One Voice Wales, the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and County associations created a Civility and respect Working Group to oversee the Civility and Respect Project.

21   The Project aims to deliver resources, actions, and interventions which will support Councils in maintaining good governance, strengthening standards regimes, act as training, and provide support to struggling Councils.

22   The Civility and Respect Working Group have worked in partnership with Breakthrough Communications to publish a guide to using social media as a Councillor titled 'Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media'.

23   Whilst some of the topics addressed within the guide are currently covered within Durham County Council's current social media toolkit, there are further topics which could be included. The review has also provided the opportunity to propose some amendments to the format of the Toolkit to make it more accessible.

Local Picture

24   At the recommendation of the Standards Committee, Council considered a report on the LGA's Debate Note Hate Campaign at its meeting on 25 January 2023 The Council agreed that the Leader would sign the statement on behalf of the Council.

25   During the debate, there were calls from several Councillors for all Councillors to sign the statement on an individual basis. Accordingly, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services circulated the link to sign the statement to Members, and many have responded to confirm that they have signed it.

26   Several Councillors chose to share their own personal experiences of abuse and intimidation. In doing so, some Members acknowledged the support in place for them within the Council to deal with incidents of abuse and intimidation.

27   One of the measures that the Council has in place is the Social Media Toolkit. This advises Councillors on how to stay safe online and what to do if they are subject to abuse and intimidation which is under review as part of this report.

Councillors' guide to Handling harassment, Abuse, and Intimidation

28   The LGA has recently published some further guidance titled 'Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse, and intimidation.' The guidance is intended to provide further steps that can be taken by Councillors and their Councils can undertake to protect Councillors.

29   The guidance recognises that the increased concern regarding abuse and intimidation aimed at Councillors in a public position often discourages others from standing or standing again for election. The LGA aim to encourage more people to stand for election, to create room for more diversity within these public positions.

30   The topics within this guidance are;

      i.   Definition of harassment, abuse, and intimidation.

      ii.   General advice for handling abuse and intimidation.

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    vi.   What legal support is there?

    vii.   Advice for supporting Councillors

    viii.   Basics on communicating with residents, colleagues, and officers

    ix.   Further resources.

19   A copy of the guidance is appended to the report at Appendix 2. It is proposed that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services will circulate the guidance to all Members and arrange for it to be available on the Members portal.

The Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media'

31   The Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media provides information for Councillors on managing social media accounts security and safety. A copy of the guide is appended to the report at Appendix 3.

32   It also includes a template for rules of engagements for use by Councillors on their social media page and information on the types of behaviour to watch out for on social media such as trolling, smear campaigns, bullying and harassment and dealing with "why can't they just….?!" Social media posts.

33   The guidance also suggests ways to encourage positive and constructive interactions on social media including the digital "Tone" of Voice", use of language and techniques for handling and reporting abuse and how to protect wellbeing by taking a break from social media.

Current Toolkit

34   There is some overlap between the content of the Guide and the content of the Council's Social Media Toolkit, which provides practical advice on the benefits of using social media, how to appropriately manage social media as well as bullying and harassment and how to deal with and report/escalate issues. Proposed changes to the Toolkit.

35   It is proposed that the Toolkit is amended to incorporate the Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media. This will require alterations to the structure and order of the Toolkit. However, it is suggested that this will make the Toolkit more accessible and easier to navigate for Members.

36   A copy of the revised toolkit is appended to this report at Appendix 4.

37   It is proposed that the contents section at the beginning of the toolkit is expanded to include subsections with hyperlinks to the different sections of the Toolkit to make it easier to navigate.

38   Within the revised toolkit, the Committee will note that some sections have been reordered and some additions made. These include:

(i)   Both sections 'Legal Considerations' and 'Specific considerations for Councillors' have been made into subsections and would be located within the Section 'Considerations when using Social Media' to make the toolkit more concise and easier to navigate.

(ii)   Moving the Code of Conduct information to be a subsection within 'Considerations when using Social Media'. This is to serve as a reminder to Councillors of the relevance of the Code of Conduct and the specific considerations they are to give when using Social Media.

(iii) The online safety and personal security section has been moved to be earlier in the guide, as this information will be significant when considering the subsequent sections within the guidance, such as privacy settings.

(iv)   A subsection has been added within the 'Netiquette' section which includes guidance about the use of positive language to shape engagement. This subsection includes guidance such as 'digital tone of voice' and engaging with a variety of views. This section which has been taken from the Civility and Respect guidance will help Members to engage with their audience on social media by providing guidance on how language may be interpreted. This subsection intends to help prevent abuse towards Members which can come as a consequence of the use of language being misinterpreted.

(v)   The use of social media during committee meetings has been moved to the section covering the responsibilities of Councillors on social media, as the key message of using social media in committee meetings is to do so in a respectful manner.

(vi)   The revised guidance gives more advice to Members on how to tackle abuse on social media. A subsection on Behaviours to watch out for on social media has been added which gives details about different types of abuse which Members may experience. This guidance aims to make it easier for Members to spot abuse, therefore allowing them to address it sooner.

(vii) A template social media rules of engagement, which was provided within the Civility and Respect guidance has been

added to the toolkit. This can be added to Individual Member's Social Media Pages to allow them to set boundaries communicating with social media users what the Member considers to be acceptable.

39   It is hoped that by adapting new guidance and continuing to review the Council's Social Media Toolkit, Members will be able to feel that they can begin to use or continue to use Social Media to engage with their residents. Social Media is a valuable asset in helping Members to interact with their residents, and the Council is committed to supporting Councillors in feeling safe when conducting their Democratic Duties.

Author(s)

Katherine Marley   Tel: 03000 265854

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. The issues referred to in this report will assist the Council in complying with its obligations under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

Finance

There are no financial implications.

Consultation

Constitution Working Group are being consulted on the proposals in respect of the Debate Not Hate Campaign. The Standards Committee will also receive a similar report at its meeting in December 2022.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No Implications

Climate Change

No Implications

Human Rights

There are no direct Human Rights implications arising out of the report. However, when considering allegations of abuse and intimidation, it is necessary to consider a balance between protecting Councillors from harassment and complying with Article 10 – Freedom of Expression of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Crime and Disorder

Incidents of abuse and intimidation may amount to criminal behaviour. The Debate Not Hate Campaign is intended to reduce incidents of abuse and intimidation and therefore have a positive impact on crime and disorder.

Staffing

No Implications

Accommodation

No Implications

Risk

No Implications

Procurement

No Implications

Appendix 2: - Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse, and intimidation

Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation

Practical steps that you and your council can undertake to protect yourself as a person in a public position.

Introduction

The role of local government is to set out and deliver local priorities and services on behalf of local communities. Councillors are local leaders and champions, bridging the gap between residents and local government. They take decisions on behalf of local residents and champion the issues affecting them. Becoming and serving as a councillor is a huge privilege and responsibility, but it also means councillors are very visible and often easily accessible to residents.

A pressing concern facing those in public office is the increasing levels of intimidation, harassment and abuse they are experiencing. While debate and expressing different views is all part of a healthy representative democracy, these unacceptable behaviours undermine the key democratic principles of free speech, debate and engagement, and sometimes pose a risk to councillors' safety. Thankfully, serious incidents remain very rare.

Councillors, their peers, political parties, council officers and, when necessary, the police, all have a role to place in addressing harassment, abuse, and intimidation. We are aware that the growth in public intimidation can put people off standing for election and this issue may affect some more than others. However, prospective and elected councillors should bear in mind that they are not alone in dealing with abuse and intimidation and there are an increasing number of ways to protect themselves and be supported by those around them.

We want to encourage more people to stand for election, including a more diverse range of people to represent their local communities. We do this through the **Be a Councillor [https://www.local.gov.uk/be-councillor]** campaign and resources like this Guide and others under the **Civility in Public Life [https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/improving-digital-citizenship-practical-guide-councillors]** programme.

In recognition of the impact of abuse and intimidation of councillors, the LGA has come together with the Welsh LGA, the Northern Ireland LGA and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to produce this and other guidance.

Using this guidance

The aim of this Guide is to provide councillors and councils with practical steps they can follow to decrease the likelihood of experiencing harassment, abuse and intimidation and give them some ideas on how to respond should an incident occur. The Guide has been developed based on the most relevant research, and best practice recognised across a range of organisations, as well as the direct experience of councillors.

Throughout the Guide we have provided some examples of criminal offences which may be relevant, however these examples are not exhaustive. You should report any concerns about behaviour or conduct, whether online or in person, which make you feel uncomfortable or unsafe to the police who have a duty to take your report seriously.

A summary of what you can expect from the police and other criminal justice agencies is included later in this Guide. Supporting councillors dealing with harassment, abuse and intimidation is of upmost importance given the potentially harmful impact that such actions have on their and their family's mental health and wellbeing. **Councillors who feel anxious, worried or seeing their daily routines adversely affected should speak with their local GP.**

We are aware that support available to councillors may vary from council to council across the four nations. We would encourage councils, political parties and others supporting councillors to consider the **Advice for supporting councillors section [https://www.local.gov.uk/advice-supporting-councillors]** of this guide, which includes helpful tips and case studies, and consider advice from other associations across the UK as necessary.

Finally, this guidance does briefly consider the issue of online abuse, including on social media. However, we know that this issue is of growing significance and so the LGA has produced a separate suite of guidance to support councillors using social media.

Please note that this Guide does not take the place of legal advice or personalised advice from the police on offences or personal security. If you are concerned about your personal safety or security as a result of abuse, harassment or intimidation contact the police.

Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation

[Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#)

Definition of harassment, abuse and intimidation

[Definition of harassment, abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#)

General advice on handling abuse and intimidation

[General advice on handling abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#)

Practical advice for handling online abuse

[Practical advice for handling online abuse | Local Government Association](#)

Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security

[Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security | Local Government Association](#)

Practical advice for handling psychological abuse and impact on wellbeing

[Practical advice for handling psychological abuse and impact on wellbeing | Local Government Association](#)

What legal support is there?

[What legal support is there? | Local Government Association](#)

Advice for supporting councillors

[Advice for supporting councillors | Local Government Association](#)

Basics on communicating with residents, colleagues and officers

[Basics on communicating with residents, colleagues and officers | Local Government Association](#)

Further resources

[Further resources | Local Government Association](#)

Appendix 3: - Actively addressing the issues of Civility and Respect on Social Media

Actively addressing the issues of Civility and Respect on social media

A Social Media Civility and Respect Guide and Policy Supplement produced by Breakthrough Communications, for and on behalf of the Civility and Respect Project.

IN COLLABORATION WITH SLCC, NALC, OVW, COUNTY ASSOCIATIONS

Table of contents

Notice

Social Media Civility & Respect Guide and Policy Supplement has been designed and developed by Breakthrough Communications. This document is hereby licensed by Breakthrough Communications & Strategies Limited for use by parish and town councils to help them proactively tackle social media civility and respect issues. This document may be used and deployed by local councils as required to suit their individual needs.

Disclaimer: this guide has been designed as a useful general guide for local councils, however please note that it does not constitute legal advice. Whilst we've done our best to make sure that the information contained within the guide is as accurate as possible at the time of production, we cannot accept any liability for error or omission whatsoever. If your council requires advice relating to your specific situation or circumstances, please contact us and we'll do our best to assist you.

Introduction

Thank you for downloading this document, which forms part of the templates and resources made available by the Civility & Respect project.

This advice and guidance provided in this document are focused on civility and respect issues as they relate to the use of social media by local councils and councillors.

This document is intended to provide a framework that empowers local councils to take a proactive approach to social media. It is designed to act as a supplement to a council's overarching social media policies and procedures. It also seeks to offer guidance to individual parish and town councillors. The guidance can be used by any size of parish or town council.

It is primarily designed to be an internal council document. However, it does contain elements that could be used in the public domain. General introduction to the issue of civility and respect from NALC and SLCC:

- [Civility and Respect (NALC)](#)

- [Civility and Respect (SLCC)](#)

Advice for the council

Evidence suggests that local councils experiencing poor conduct or vexatious demands or complaints often experience problems over a significant period of time. The longer an issue is permitted to continue, unaddressed, the more complex, time-consuming, and expensive the resolution becomes.

There are several reasons why parish and town councils should adopt a proactive approach. For instance:

- It demonstrates a committed approach by the council to social media and issues relating to civility and respect

- It sets out a clear corporate framework for the council

- It provides guidance to individual members of the council

- It complements your existing policies and procedures, in particular, those relating to civility and respect

- Helps to spread best practice across the sector

Suggested first steps

It is important that your council takes a proactive approach to civility and respect issues.

Here are some ways you can get off on the right foot with social media.

Raise internal awareness

The first step your council should take is formally adopting the civility and respect pledge. Your council can do this by visiting either the NALC website or the SLCC website.

Regularly remind councillors and staff about civility and respect issues and the guidelines for respectful social media.

For example, once a quarter your council could send out a short email to all staff and councillors. This could be a wider, proactive message about civility and respect issues and include a link to the Supplement on your website.

You should also actively remind councillors and officers about the training that is available both in relation to social media and reinforcing positive behaviour

You could also direct councillors to the relevant section in this document.

The Council could also adopt some specific policies and procedures concerning social media. Please see the template Supplement at the end of this document.

Raise public awareness

Make the pledge wording available on your council's website, ideally in a prominent place. Try to place a link to this and other social media policies near any social media links, if possible, as this will help raise public awareness.

Include a link on your council's social media accounts. This could be a link in a pinned post, for example. Your council could also have a link in the 'description section' of any social media accounts, or as part of its 'bio' if relevant.

You could also place the Bullying and Harassment zero tolerance notice on your website parts of this document, as appropriate.

Share best practice and highlight bad practices

It is always important to highlight good practice with colleagues. It is equally important to remind people why good conduct on social media is important. Your council could consider sharing resources such as videos and articles.

Proactively encourage two-way civility and respect through the council's social media channels

When there is a positive news story relating to your council or area, try to encourage positive engagement. This can be on any aspect of the work of the council, from its day-to-day services, its people and teams, the projects it carries out, and so much more. It can also relate to awards and recognition.

For example, if the council does well in an 'In Bloom' competition, your council could take the following easy steps to proactively boost two-way civility and respect on its social media channels:

1. Take a picture or video of the beautiful flowers, or the team collecting the award

2. Create a positive post

3. Ask councillors and other members of staff to positively comment, react and share

4. Repeat the next time there is some good news

You could also promote events such as World Kindness Day. This event takes place worldwide every year on 13th November.

General social media advice for councillors

What is social media?

Social media is applications or websites that encourage and enable users to network. Such applications and websites allow users to easily generate, post and share content.

Put simply - there are a huge amount of social media platforms and there are more every day. Some might use the following:
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- WhatsApp

Tip: Different platforms will allow you to speak to different 'audiences' or parts of your community. Instagram is popular with younger people. Twitter is popular with organisations. Think carefully about who you want or need to speak to.

Why use social media as a councillor?

Social media is a simple, quick and effective way of communicating. It's also cheap and allows a user to reach whole communities at the click of a button.

More than that, social media is built for community engagement. Councils and councillors can have 2-way conversations rather than simply broadcasting information.

Tip: Some people aren't on social media at all. Not everyone on social media will be on the platform that you are using. Remember both of these things when seeking feedback or opinions from your community.

New to social media as a councillor?

If you have never used social media as a councillor, start with small steps. Take advice, don't rush into things. Start off on one platform and master it before moving on to another.

Setting up a Facebook Page is a good place to start. It is easy to do and most people are familiar with it. Lots of people are still active Facebook users - despite it now being considered 'traditional' social media.

Once you have yourself set up, start with a simple 'Hello'. Try to post engaging content. Ask questions, take feedback and build a two-way conversation. Build a community by trying to grow the number of followers or subscribers you have.

Tip: Sharing content with local groups on social media is an easy way of growing the number of followers you have. But be careful not to share too much with groups and ensure the content is relevant to them.

How do I manage my social media security and safety?

It is really easy to share information about yourself. That is indeed the whole point of social media. So as a councillor you need to think carefully about what you put out there and how much of it.

Before you start posting it is worthwhile thinking about not only what is safe to post, but what you are comfortable with posting. As a general rule, don't share personal information, such as your personal phone number, date of birth, or home address.

Remember that you need to also consider the personal data of others around you. You might be comfortable living your life in the public glare, but you need to ask yourself: "Are my family, friends, neighbours, and work colleagues?"

From a security point of view, think carefully before you post. Once something is on social media you lose nearly all control as to how it will be used.

As with emails you will need to watch out for phishing scams, cons and malicious software.

Finally, there are trolls who post content that is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further their own goals.

A troll is often someone who posts just to get an emotional reaction or to manipulate others' perceptions. The posts can be offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, purposefully inaccurate, or insincere. Trolls often do this for their own amusement or in aid of goals such as disrupting the democratic process.

It is important 'not to feed the trolls. Stay focused on what's important and try not to respond to content that is purposefully offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, inaccurate, or insincere

Tip: Every social media platform has a slightly different set of privacy options and controls. Do your research and set them correctly <u>BEFORE</u> you start to post content and not after.

What are my responsibilities as a councillor on social media?

Golden Rule - If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first before doing anything else.

Social media almost always operates in the public domain. Once something is published it is often out there for everyone to see. Social media content can:
- Go 'viral' - meaning it can be seen by a large number of people
- Be altered or changed without your consent
- Be taken out of context
- Shared around the world

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

Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a councillor will not prevent someone else from pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement. In such a situation you will likely be held personally liable.

Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion. You also play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation. Think twice before you press 'share' or 'retweet'!

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.

Councillors are still subject to the Code of Conduct on social media. If you refer to your role as a councillor it is likely that you may be considered to be acting in an "official capacity".

When posting to social media you should remember:

- You are an elected representative of the council

- What you post can affect the reputation of the council

- The council is a corporate decision-making body. You cannot independently make decisions for the council over social media

- Some issues and communications are best left to the council's official social media accounts, which is usually managed by officers

- Having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations - for instance in the event of major flooding

- You don't have to respond or comment to everything on social media - sometimes it's best not to

Tip: 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.

Do I need to manage my social media profiles and pages?

You should consider having a separate social media page or profile for council use. This will help to avoid confusion, both for yourself and others. On Facebook, this can be done by setting up a Facebook Page.

Please keep in mind that even information posted to a private social media account can quickly find its way into the public domain. Regardless of the social media platform used, it can be useful to indicate the purpose of your profile or page. This will help to make clear that it is a public page or profile you are using in your capacity as a councillor.

It is your responsibility to manage whatever you set up on social media. It is likely over time that others will contribute and comment. There are some basic things you should consider, such as how you will handle abusive language or harassment.

Social media platforms provide administrators with lots of tools and settings to help with management and moderation. Make sure you know how they work and use them appropriately. This will save you time and stop problems from happening.

Civility and respect social media guide for councillors

When councillors use social media, the Code of Conduct may apply. Under the Localism Act 2011, the Code of Conduct will only likely apply when acting in the role of councillor and is unlikely to affect councillors using social media in a private capacity.

Councillors who wish to use social media in their capacity as a councillor should consider having separate social media accounts. This will help to avoid confusion, both for yourself and others. For example, on Facebook, this can be done by setting up a public Facebook Page where you use the 'Councillor' label before your name.

Regardless of the platform councillors use, it can be useful to indicate what the purpose of your profile or page is. This will help to make clear that it is a public page or profile you are using in your capacity as a councillor.

It is the responsibility of councillors to manage their social media. Councillors should consider, for example, how you will handle the moderation of comments and messages.

The Council suggests that councillors consider the following guidance when using social media in their councillor role:

● Be as open, inclusive and professional as possible when using social media.

● Get and give support. Where you feel able, provide support to fellow councillors online, and reach out to colleagues and your council for support where needed.

● If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice from an appropriate source first, before doing anything else.

● Bear in mind that what you post can affect the reputation of the council

● The council is a corporate decision-making body. Councillors cannot independently make decisions for the council over social media.

● You should make clear you are expressing personal views and opinions, and not speaking on behalf of the council unless authorised by the council to do so.

● For some issues and communications, responses may need to come from the council's official social media, rather than individual councillors responding.

● Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion.

● Elected members play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation.

● Don't leave your social media to take care of itself. Social media doesn't stop - it keeps going all day every day.

- Don't dismiss or ignore advice and guidance, particularly legal advice.

- Don't assume that a disclaimer or excuses will prevent someone from taking legal action against you.

- Make sure that your social media accounts are safe and protected with strong passwords and multiple-factor authentication where possible.

- Understand privacy settings. There is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.

- Consider personal mental health and well-being. Taking a break from social media from time to time can be beneficial.

Suggested social media rules of engagement for individual councillors

Clear rules of engagement can help a councillor or council to set out what their aims are, how they will behave and how they expect users on their account to behave.

These rules of engagement have been created specifically with issues of civility and respect in mind. However, they are wider reaching.

These suggested rules of engagement could be used on either a councillor's social media account or a council's account. They could be posted to social media in the account description, a pinned post/tweet or a link to a page on a website.

Welcome!

Hello and welcome to my/our social media page. I/we want to create a safe space for everyone in our community to engage on (insert social media platform). These rules of engagement have been created to set out what you can expect from me/us. They also set out what I/we expect of you if you wish to join in the discussion.

Rule 1: Be responsible and respectful

- Be open and honest.

- Be civil and respectful.

- Do not post anonymously or use a false name.

- Debate is fine, so long as it is carried out in a civil and respectful way.

Rule 2: Engage in positive conversations

- Actively participate in positive discussions.

- Be open to different points of view and others opinions.

- Share good news and success from our area.

- Share posts or content from other local organisations, groups and individuals where it is appropriate to do so.

Rule 3: Address poor conduct

- Do not spread false information or unsubstantiated accusations.

- Posts must not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

- Posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

- No social media user should have to put up with abusive or threatening behaviour. I/we reserve the right to delete content, block individuals or report individuals to social media platforms when necessary.

Guide to tackling online abuse for both councillors and officers

A brief introduction

Social media offers many opportunities for councillors and councils to constructively engage with their communities. Most of the time this is a positive experience. Social media helps to build a profile, explain complex issues in plain English and to develop a two-way conversation.

Unfortunately, in a small number of cases councillors and councils can experience online abuse. Social media can become a place where individuals resort to abusive behaviour, such as aggressive language, threats, trolling and bullying.

Types of abusive behaviour to watch out for

Trolls

Unfortunately, online abuse is an issue on every social media platform. Sometimes it will be random or short-lived. On other occasions, it can be more sustained and led by users who are often described as 'trolls'.

A troll is often someone who posts just to get an emotional reaction or to manipulate others perceptions. The posts can be offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, purposefully inaccurate or insincere. Trolls often do this for their own amusement or in aid of goals such as disrupting the democratic process.

All too often trolls post things without thinking, without obvious logic and without a good reason. It is therefore important to remember that trolls often do not believe what they themselves are posting.

'Why can't they just…?!'

Many issues that councils deal with are complex. From inside the council, this is clear. From the outside, it can appear like 'nothing is happening'. Sometimes it can be difficult to explain in plain English why a simple solution will not work.

Some people in the community will have their own 'simple' or 'common sense' solution to a problem. This can lead to people making the 'Why can't they just…?!' social media posts.

Residents sometimes consider councillors and councils to be ignoring them when their simple solution is not considered or implemented. The problem is compounded by the fact that some 'Why can't they just…?!' posts are picked up by the local media.

Problems can also emerge when people are pressed for detail on how the 'simple solution' would work. Providing information that shows a 'simple solution' will not work can cause some people to become aggressive, incoherent and defensive.

Legitimate challenge and scrutiny

Challenge and scrutiny are a key part of our democracy and the decision-making process. It can for example help us to see where a decision might be having an unintended or negative impact. This feedback is critical.

Challenge and scrutiny should be constructive. It should not lead to offensive language and abusive behaviour. There is an important line that should not be crossed between legitimate challenge and online abuse.

Councillors and councils should not seek to stifle debate or censure views. However, they should not be put in a position where they are subject to offensive language and abusive behaviour.

Politics

Politics is similar to challenge and scrutiny. It has an important role to play in debate and forms an important part of the democratic process.

Councillors and councils should not seek to suppress other people's political views. However, the political debate does not give people online a licence to abuse elected officials. Once again there is a clear line between healthy debate and online abuse.

Smear campaigns

A smear campaign is a deliberate attempt to negatively impact a person's or organisation's standing or damage their reputation. Smears are usually done through the spread of false information and discrediting tactics. They can be 'one-off' comments. Unfortunately, some are sustained and organised.

Smear campaigns can be one of the hardest forms of online abuse to deal with. In some cases it might require legal advice to be taken or for the Police to get involved. Remember to keep a record of the abuse and report the issue to the social media platform and authorities as appropriate.

Bullying and harassment

Online bullying and harassment has unfortunately become more common in recent years. Whilst it often appears in the press in relation to teenagers and young people it is something that can affect anybody.

Online bullying and harassment is when someone bullies or harasses someone else online. It includes a wide range of behaviours such as threats, sexual remarks and hate speech. In some situations, it can form a sustained pattern of behaviour.

Use positive language and tone to shape engagement

Your digital 'tone of voice'

Your tone of voice is as important on social media as it is in face-to-face conversation. On social media, with all its angry voices you can use your tone of voice to shape engagement. To create a more positive and constructive environment. Remain calm and positive to help defuse the situation and steer the conversation in a positive direction.

Using language to shape the conversation

The language that councillors use on social media is critical for building on the tone of voice that we use. When you are being attacked it can be hard to avoid using aggressive language yourself.

Even when it seems to you like it's the only option - using aggressive language never improves the situation.

Councillors and officers should try to stick to positive and inclusive language. This helps to control the nature of the interaction and keep things as constructive as possible.

Social media language is often 'chatty' and it is important to make the language you use as accessible as possible. Avoid acronyms and 'council speak'. It is common for councillors or officers to use acronyms for their own council or a committee (for example VFM rather than Value for Money Committee). Not many people in the community will understand what such acronyms mean.

Be kind!

People are generally much more rational if treated with kindness and compassion. It is important to be seen by those watching the discussion that you are putting your point of view across in a calm, patient and professional way.

Finding common ground

Try to find some common ground that allows you to calm the debate and show those that are in the discussion that you share similar priorities or come from the same background as them.

Usually, councillors (and often officers) will live in the community they represent so that can be a great place to start disarming those who are being aggressive by making common cause with your community.

Asking people 'how' rather than 'why'

Asking people 'how' rather than 'why' is a good way of working through how things would work in practice. Talking about how this would play out rather than dwelling on why it is (or is not) a good idea helps to engage people constructively and can expose the complexity and flaws that make their simple-sounding suggestion difficult in reality. This forces them to reassess and prompts a more moderate attitude.

Techniques to handle online abuse

Engage with a variety of views

Building up your following on social media means that it is harder for a small number of angry voices to dominate. It also allows you as a councillor to hear from, and engage with, a wider variety of people from across your community.

It also ensures that more people will be able to see and share the arguments you are making in response to attacks. This builds further on your tone of voice and treating people with respect even if they are not affording you the same courtesy as a larger audience will see the way in which the debate is conducted.

Have a consistent narrative

Sharing a consistent story to fill gaps in people's knowledge helps to dispel conspiracy theories and baseless rumours by presenting a clear and credible narrative.

Escalation of an issue

In some situations, you can escalate an issue. If there is a complaint about a council service it can be a legitimate course of action to 'pass on' the issue to a council officer. Depending on how the complaint was made you might need to consider data protection issues. Sometimes taking this course of action and being able to demonstrate that action is being taken can help to defuse the situation.

The wider audience - who is looking?

In some situations, you might feel there is a need to reply. To get the truth out there or to set the record straight. It is important before replying that you consider the likelihood that you will succeed. It is important to ask yourself, who is the wider audience?

Making a balanced and reasoned argument has value when there is a wider audience watching the discussion. Most of those seeing the exchange will not actively engage. In this situation 'winning' means ensuring that those looking on are reassured and given accurate information.

Conversely, if you think no one is looking, you need to ask yourself the question, is it worth responding to?

If you respond you should avoid getting sucked into a lengthy debate over social media. Not only is this very time-consuming you are also very unlikely to get the last word in the debate.

Keep a record

When you receive online abuse you should make a record of it. This is important in case the matter develops further. Particularly if the police or other bodies become involved. It is also useful in demonstrating a pattern of behaviour.

Managing trolls

Trolls can be difficult to deal with. The best way to deal with a troll is 'not to feed it'. By which we mean, don't respond to a post which is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further a troll's own goals.

Your best response is to either:
* Ignore what they have posted, or
* If it's on your own page or profile to delete or hide their comment. This will mean your other followers should not see it

If that doesn't work, consider your next step. This could include blocking them or reporting them to the social media platform or in some cases the Police.

Deleting and moderating comments

Most social media platforms give you the ability to delete comments. If someone has made an abusive comment you might want to delete it. You should remember to take a 'screen grab' picture first.

Some social media will give you the ability to automatically moderate content. Some have a 'profanity filter'. Where this facility exists you should consider using it. It will save you time and reduce the impact of abusive comments and behaviour.

Blocking abusive social media users

On almost all social media platforms you can block individuals who are persistently abusive. If individuals are consistently aggressive it can be both sensible and reasonable to block them from further engaging with you.

It is important to remember that as a councillor or officer you do not have to accept abusive behaviour. You have as much right as anyone to be treated with dignity and respect. You can include "rules of engagement" on your profile to make it clear to others that you will not tolerate such behaviour.

Blocking those who are abusive is important for both you and also for other people who follow you who may feel intimidated by aggressive behaviour. They also have a right to express their views.

Reporting online abuse and legal matters

Reporting an issue to the social media platform

Most social media platforms have 'rules' or 'terms of use' that prohibit abusive behaviour. Each has different wording, but most forbid behaviours that are abusive, bullying, harassing or intimidating behaviour.

If you feel someone has broken a social media platforms 'rules' you can report the user to the platform in question. It will then be up to the platform to take further action.

Reporting an issue to the Police

In certain circumstances, you might need to report a matter to the Police. Threats of violence, racist language, hate speech and pornographic material are the sort of things you might need to report. If you do report the matter you should follow the advice given to you by the Police and their requests for information.

Reporting a breach of the Code of Conduct

Should you receive online abuse from a councillor that might be a Code of Conduct issue. If you believe that there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct you should report it to the relevant monitoring officer.

Taking legal action

In some situations, you might feel that taking legal action is a legitimate course of action. In such a situation you should seek legal advice and carefully consider the risks as well as the likelihood of success. There is also often a financial cost involved with this approach.

Valuing your mental health and well-being - when is it time to get off social media?

If abuse is persistent and harming your mental health or severely damaging the reputation of the organisation it may well be time to leave social media. This can mean deleting accounts entirely or just taking a break from it for a while.

Some social media platforms allow users to temporarily 'unpublish' or 'deactivate' accounts. Some people find that trying a new platform can be useful. For instance, trying out Instagram instead of Facebook.

There are well-documented mental health benefits to coming off social media for either a fixed period of time or permanently.

Appendix 1: Template Social Media Policy Supplement - Civility and Respect

1. Engaging with the council on social media

1.2 The council encourages members of the public, local organisations and community groups, members of the press, local councillors and others in our wider community to follow and engage with the council through social media accounts.

1.3 We also encourage everyone in our community to share content from our corporate social media accounts with their own social media networks. This is especially important, for example, during emergency situations or where sharing timely information is essential.

1.4 Councillors may choose to engage with the community on their own 'councillor' social media accounts.

1.4 Individuals and organisations are responsible for the content that they choose to post to their social media accounts. This includes content created by others that individuals or organisations choose to repost, retweet or share.

2. Conduct on social media

2.1 The Council will treat everyone with courtesy and respect on its social media channels, and we therefore ask for the same in return from those who choose to engage with us.

2.2 We ask that council staff and councillors are treated courteously. Council staff and councillors should never be subjected to bullying or other forms of abuse or harassment.

2.3 Council staff and councillors have the right to carry out their civic duties and work without fear of being attacked or abused. Any behaviour whether that be verbal, physical or in writing, which causes either councillors or council staff to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened, is unacceptable.

3. Reporting a civility and respect-related issue

3.1 Council staff and others operating the Council's social media accounts will at all times be mindful of the council's relevant policies, procedures and processes, including the Code of Conduct.

3.2 The council will record and report abuse directed at the Council. The Council may, for example, create screenshots of comments and keep a record of abusive or threatening communications, and may take further action as appropriate.

3.3 Council staff and councillors should not have to put up with abusive or threatening behaviour. When subjected to such behaviour. The council reserves the right to enact its relevant social media policies and may, for example, delete content, block individuals or report individuals to social media platforms when appropriate to do so.

3.4 The Council may need to report issues of poor conduct directly to social media platforms. For instance, if someone has created a 'fake account' or if someone is persistently abusive to the Council.

3.5 The Council reserves the right to report criminal matters it notices on social media to the Police. For instance, hate crime/speech or threats of violence.

3.6 Please get in touch with the Council if you feel that a councillor, member of staff or a user of our social media has failed to act in a civil and respectful way on our social media.

3.7 You can contact **((INSERT NAME))** the **((INSERT JOB TITLE))** in the following ways:

- **((ADDRESS))**

- **((TELEPHONE))**

- **((EMAIL))**

Appendix 4: - Revised Social Media Toolkit

Social Media Toolkit

Introduction

Social media encapsulates a wide range of applications and channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Blogs etc.

The benefits of social media are widely recognised, and it is a helpful tool for Councillors to engage with their communities.

Social Media affords the Councillors the opportunity to engage with people who do not traditionally seek out their local representatives. It can assist Councillors in gaining an understanding of the local issues, to keep up to date with developments whether that be through the news, publications or announcements and be a vital tool for public debate and its use by Councillors is encouraged.

There are however some pitfalls to be aware of, and this local Guidance is produced to help Councillors avoid these.

Back to Top

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Considerations when using social media

Legal considerations

Like anyone else publishing material, Councillors need to be aware of the laws that apply to published material. Some of the main ones are

- **Defamation**: if you publish an untrue statement about a person or an organisation that is damaging to their reputation you may be liable to pay damages;
- **Copyright**: publishing information that is not yours, without permission, may also result in an award of damages against you;
- **Harassment**: it is an offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against a person that is likely to cause alarm, harassment, or distress;
- **Data protection**: do not publish personal data of other people, including photographs, without their express permission to do so;
- **Incitement**: it is an offence to incite any criminal act;
- **Discrimination and 'protected characteristics'**: it is an offence to discriminate against anyone based on protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010);
- **Malicious and obscene communications**: it is an offence to send malicious or obscene communications.

Back to Top

Specific considerations for Councillors

Bias and pre-determination

Councillors sitting on regulatory committees such as planning, or licensing should be aware that they are allowed to have a view but must not have gone so far as to have predetermined their position on a matter. Any views aired on social media (including "liking" a comment made by others) could be used as evidence of making a decision in advance of hearing all relevant information. The Council's decision is then open to challenge and could be invalidated, and provisions of the Code of Conduct could be engaged.

Equality and discrimination

The Council is a public authority required to comply with the Equalities Act 2010. It is an offence to discriminate against anyone based on their protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity).

The Council must also have 'due regard' to the Public Sector Equality Duty (which consists of eliminating unlawful discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity, and fostering good relations) and that applies to Councillors when appearing to act in their official capacity.

Electioneering

Council resources, including the use of social media on Council mobile devices or IT equipment, should not be used for political/campaign purposes. Particular care should also be taken when using

social media during the pre-election publicity period (the period between the notice of election and polling day).

Councillors can continue to use their social media pages during the pre-election period and may use it for campaigning purposes, subject to the Electoral Commission's guidance on election campaigning.

Councillors also need to be mindful that in using their Councillor social media page for these purposes may engage the Member Code of Conduct.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services issues guidance to all members on the pre-election publicity rules in advance of an election.

The Electoral Commission has also published guidance including on the requirements to provide a return of expenditure on election advertising which includes web advertising.

Human rights

Article 8 of the European Convention provides that public authorities should not interfere with the right of individuals to a private and family life without lawful authority to do so, and where it is necessary, proportionate, and in pursuit of one of the aims set out in Article 8(2) which are national security, public safety, economic well-being, health or morals, prevention of crime or disorder, or protecting others' rights. Observing the use of social media by other people, even on 'open' profiles, can engage Article 8.

Back to Top

Code of Conduct

Councillors should at all times be aware that when using social media they remain subject to the Council code of conduct.

Councillors may use social media in both an official and personal capacity, but they must be aware that the public may perceive them as acting in capacity when that is not their intention. If you refer to your role as a councillor, it is likely that you may be considered to be acting in an "official capacity".

Any social media account which could be potentially linked to a Councillor would need to meet the standards of the Code of Conduct.

You should also consider your position carefully as to whether your online 'followers' or 'friends' are "close associates", for the purpose of declaring interests and participation in meetings where their well-being or financial position would be affected.

Back to Top

Online safety and personal security

In any personal online biography, it is advisable to make clear that the views are those of the Councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council.

Every social media platform has a slightly different set of privacy options and controls. Do your research and set them correctly before you start to post content and not after.

If space allows, you may also want to set out a 'response' policy, such as "I welcome questions via email" and an 'engagement' policy', such as "abusive content will be removed".

It is easy to put personal information online, such as your birthday, routines, places you frequent, future visits, holiday destinations, relationships, and opinions, which are then available for anyone in the public domain to access. For personal safety, as well as identity security, you may want to consider whether you share personal information, images of friends and/or family and details of any routines.

Social media posts now include location-based information, particularly from mobile phones, which tells people exactly where you are or where you have been. Again, with personal security in mind, you may want to turn off these notifications.

You can 'search for yourself' to check what information you can find out about yourself, your family, or your business on-line. Checking this regularly means you can check what is in the public domain and edit it if necessary.

Before you start posting it is worthwhile thinking about not only what is safe to post, but what you are comfortable with posting. With respect to personal security, it is advisable not to include on social media details such as your personal phone numbers, home address, details of friends and family or vehicle details.

A photo can relay personal information you may not want shared on social media. It is advisable to only publish photos of family, friends and colleagues with your consent and theirs, to ensure photos don't reveal your home or places frequented with family such as schools or care homes, and to disable automatic photo and location tagging so that you have to approve another user identifying you in a photo or being at a specific location. You may also want to make your family and friends aware that you will be following these precautions.

From a security point of view, think carefully before you post. Once something is on social media you lose nearly all control as to how it will be used.

Things to watch out for:

Social media phishing scams

An attack executed through platforms like Facebook, or Twitter. The purpose of such an attack is to steal personal data or gain control of your social media account. These scams are often crafted to look like they are from a reliable source

Malicious Software

A file or code, typically delivered over a network, that infects, explores, steals or conducts virtually any behaviour an attacker wants.

Some people say things via social media that they probably would not say in person, and they can post false information, insults, or messages that you would not want to be associated with you. These can multiply and be shared quite rapidly. Councillors can subject of online abuse, bullying and harassment on social media for further information on how to deal with this see section Abuse on Social Media and how to tackle this.

Having a social media presence means that people can contact you at any time. It can mean that a reply can be expected immediately which can create a sense of pressure. It is useful to set your own rules and limits for how you manage your social media presence.

Be aware that some individuals post socially unacceptable, defamatory, inciting or even intimidatory remarks to generate online activity on the back of advertising or promotion of ideologies, brands, or events. Similarly, the term "internet troll" is used to refer to a person or group of people who deliberately start arguments or upset people by posting inflammatory or off-topic messages online with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal discussion, often for their own amusement.

The usual protocols regarding confidential information, copyright, data protection, purdah, exempt reports, etc. apply to social media. Avoid publishing anything where there is doubt or seek permission in advance.

Back to Top

Responsibility of Councillors on social media

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

Councillors are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of social media. Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a defamation action for which you will be personally liable. This also applies if you pass on any similar untrue statements you receive.

Social media sites are in the public domain, and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is extremely difficult to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

You can make use of strict privacy settings if you do not want your social media to be accessed by the press or public, however, please be aware that others that have access to your social media could share its content (either deliberately or inadvertently) so you should exercise caution on any private accounts also.

Members should:

- read the terms of service of any social media site accessed;
- ensure your pages meet the relevant social media platform and the Electoral Commission's requirements in relation to political engagement/advertising;
- ensure your pages meet any requirements of your political group/party;
- make sure you understand the social media platform privacy settings, the links which can be found at the further guidance section of this document

It is important to keep in mind, however, that even the strictest privacy settings are no guarantee for posts or actions to remain private. As a rule of thumb, never post anything online you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting. If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first before doing anything else.

The code of conduct for Councillors and relevant legislation continues to apply online and in social media. If you are referring online in any way to your role as a Councillor, you are deemed to be acting in your "official capacity" and any conduct may fall within the code.

When posting to social media you should remember:

- You are an elected representative of the council
- What you post can affect the reputation of the council
- The council is a corporate decision-making body. You cannot independently make decisions for the council over social media
- Some issues and communications are best left to the council's official social media accounts, which is usually managed by officers
- Having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations - for instance in the event of major flooding

- You don't have to respond or comment to everything on social media - sometimes it's best not to

You may wish to set up a community page on Facebook. These are valuable platforms to promote local information, news, events, or council developments or seek people's views on community or council proposals. Other Ward Councillors and other members of the community can contribute and comment in an interactive manner and whilst most is constructive and uses acceptable language, some individuals may use bad language or 'cross the line' into abuse or harassment.

If you are a Group or Page administrator, Facebook provides you with a range of tools to manage and moderate other people's content or contributions to your Group or Page for more serious breaches of standards.

You can:

- block certain words or apply a 'profanity filter' in the settings, this will stop such postings appearing in your page.
- hide or delete comments, photos, or tags.
- ban or remove someone from your pages.

Useful guidance and instructions are available on the 'Banning and Moderation' section of Facebook. Administering a large Group can be a lot of work, particularly if group Councillors are active. If that's the case, you might want to share the responsibility with other Councillors. Guidance on making other people or administrators is available on Facebook.

Back to Top

Use of social media during committee meetings

Use mobile devices (other than official equipment for the meeting) sparingly, discreetly and with common sense whilst at meetings, considering the impression you are giving to others.

Councillors should be mindful that regulatory committees such as planning, or licensing require the Councillor to alert officers to any lobbying material they have received. This would be difficult if it arrives on Twitter and is read by the Councillor during the course of a meeting.

Mobile devices enable Councillors to manage their busy lives when time is at a premium. There may be occasions when texting or e-mailing between Councillors during meetings on matters relevant to the debate at hand may be valuable (on the same basis as circulating paper notes). However, it is important for Councillors not to give the impression that insufficient attention is being given to the discussion at the meeting. This could lead to the relevant decision coming under challenge if Councillors are perceived to have made a decision without having properly listened to the debate. It could also result in Code of Conduct complaints of a failure to treat others with respect or of bringing the Council into disrepute.

Back to Top

Netiquette

It is recommended that Councillors use social media accounts/pages for council or ward business, which are separate from their personal (or those of close family members/friends) social media profiles and clearly identifiable as accounts used in your official capacity.

It is your responsibility to manage whatever you set up on social media. It is likely over time that others will contribute and comment. There are some basic things you should consider, such as how you will handle abusive language or harassment.

Councillors will need to monitor and, where appropriate, censor or remove the contributions made by others to their sites.

Allowing defamatory or offensive statements to remain on a site can become the Councillor's own legal problem as the 'publisher' of the material and could also give rise to Code issues were allowing comments to remain could be seen as condoning or endorsing them.

The council has a clear approach to the moderation of social media on its website and it is recommended that Councillors apply the same to moderating their own accounts.

If you let people post comments, then you should have clear and prominent guidelines about when you will moderate comments or block people from posting to the site. You should regularly monitor your site, and not be afraid to follow these guidelines.

Similarly, 'liking', 'sharing', or 're-tweeting' posts could be seen as an endorsement of them and legally this can be a separate instance of publication, by the Councillor, to which all the legal and Code considerations would apply.

Beyond that it is generally best to allow disagreement rather than to seek to censor it, although this should not dissuade you from your objective of seeking to persuade or to foster consensus. However, there is no need to respond to everything and unhelpful online arguments should be avoided. Be professional, respectful, and polite, even (or especially) when corresponding with those who do not return the courtesy. Promptly admit to mistakes of fact.

You are strongly advised to avoid using social media when you are tired, angry, upset or your judgment may be impaired. Be aware that 'trolling' posts can be intended to bounce you into an unwise response to be used against you, and always consider whether anything you write might be interpreted in a way you do not intend. If 'trolling' becomes unacceptably harassing then report it to the Police and seek advice from, as appropriate, Member Support or your Parish Clerk.

Think carefully about who to 'follow' or 'befriend' online and be cautious about accepting 'friend' requests from anyone under the age of 18. Online 'friendships' with Council Officers should be avoided as they may compromise the appearance of impartial advice. It is inadvisable to 'follow' anyone without a good reason and many Councillors wait to be 'followed' before considering returning the compliment.

Back to Top

Using Positive Language to Shape Engagement

Your digital 'tone of voice'

Your tone of voice is as important on social media as it is in face-to-face conversation. On social media, with all its angry voices you can use your tone of voice to shape engagement. To create a more positive and constructive environment. Remain calm and positive to help defuse the situation and steer the conversation in a positive direction.

Using language to shape the conversation

The language that councillors use on social media is critical for building on the tone of voice that we use. When you are being attacked it can be hard to avoid using aggressive language yourself.

Even when it seems to you like it's the only option - using aggressive language never improves the situation.

Councillors and officers should try to stick to positive and inclusive language. This helps to control the nature of the interaction and keep things as constructive as possible.

Social media language is often 'chatty' and it is important to make the language you use as accessible as possible. Avoid acronyms and 'council speak'. It is common for councillors or officers to use acronyms for their own council or a committee (for example VFM rather than Value for Money Committee). Not many people in the community will understand what such acronyms mean.

Engage with a variety of views

Building up your following on social media means that it is harder for a small number of angry voices to dominate. It also allows you as a councillor to hear from, and engage with, a wider variety of people from across your community.

It also ensures that more people will be able to see and share the arguments you are making in response to attacks. This builds further on your tone of voice and treating people with respect even if they are not affording you the same courtesy as a larger audience will see the way in which the debate is conducted.

Have a consistent narrative

Sharing a consistent story to fill gaps in people's knowledge helps to dispel conspiracy theories and baseless rumours by presenting a clear and credible narrative.

Be kind!

People are generally much more rational if treated with kindness and compassion. It is important to be seen by those watching the discussion that you are putting your point of view across in a calm, patient and professional way.

Finding common ground

Try to find some common ground that allows you to calm the debate and show those that are in the discussion that you share similar priorities or come from the same background as them.

Usually, councillors (and often officers) will live in the community they represent so that can be a great place to start disarming those who are being aggressive by making common cause with your community.

Asking people 'how' rather than 'why'

Asking people 'how' rather than 'why' is a good way of working through how things would work in practice. Talking about how this would play out rather than dwelling on why it is (or is not) a good idea helps to engage people constructively and can expose the complexity and flaws that make their simple-sounding suggestion difficult in reality. This forces them to reassess and prompts a more moderate attitude.

Escalation of an issue

In some situations, you can escalate an issue. If there is a complaint about a council service, it can be a legitimate course of action to 'pass on' the issue to a council officer. Depending on how the complaint was made you might need to consider data protection issues. Sometimes taking this course of action and being able to demonstrate that action is being taken can help to defuse the situation.

Back to Top

Abuse on social media and how to tackle this

Social media offers many opportunities for councillors and councils to constructively engage with their communities. Most of the time this is a positive experience. Social media helps to build a profile, explain complex issues in plain English and to develop a two-way conversation.

Any intimidation or abuse on social media is subject to all the same potential criminal prosecutions as other forms of intimidation, with the additional criminal offences relating specifically to electronic communications. You are best placed to determine whether a post or interaction is abusive or intimidating, and if you feel intimidated you can take action to report it.

Every situation will be different, and it will need a personal judgement about whether it is worthwhile to pursue the incident, ignore it or politely acknowledge.

If you have received online abuse, even if you are not overly concerned or if you intend to ignore it, you should consider keeping a record should any incidents escalate in the future. You can simply 'screen shot', 'clip' or 'snip' tweets or posts on your phone, tablet, or computer. (Members Support can help you do this). You may also decide to warn the perpetrator that you are keeping a record of all messages and may refer them to the appropriate authorities, which may stop them posting further comments or might encourage them to delete them. For more serious incidents, the guidance below will assist.

Back to Top

Behaviour to watch out for

Trolls

A troll is often someone who posts just to get an emotional reaction or to manipulate others' perceptions. The posts can be offensive, off-topic, inflammatory, purposefully inaccurate, or insincere. Trolls often do this for their own amusement or in aid of goals such as disrupting the democratic process.

'Why can't they just...?!'

Many issues that councils deal with are complex. From inside the council, this is clear. From the outside, it can appear like 'nothing is happening'. Sometimes it can be difficult to explain in plain English why a simple solution will not work.

Some people in the community will have their own 'simple' or 'common sense' solution to a problem. This can lead to people making the 'Why can't they just...?!' social media posts.

Residents sometimes consider councillors and councils to be ignoring them when their simple solution is not considered or implemented. The problem is compounded by the fact that some 'Why can't they just...?!' posts are picked up by the local media.

Problems can also emerge when people are pressed for detail on how the 'simple solution' would work. Providing information that shows a 'simple solution' will not work can cause some people to become aggressive, incoherent, and defensive.

Smear campaigns

A smear campaign is a deliberate attempt to negatively impact a person's or organisation's standing or damage their reputation. Smears are usually done through the spread of false information and

discrediting tactics. They can be 'one-off' comments. Unfortunately, some are sustained and organised.

Smear campaigns can be one of the hardest forms of online abuse to deal with. In some cases, it might require legal advice to be taken or for the Police to get involved. Remember to keep a record of the abuse and report the issue to the social media platform and authorities as appropriate.

Bullying and harassment

Online bullying and harassment have unfortunately become more common in recent years. Whilst it often appears in the press in relation to teenagers and young people it is something that can affect anybody.

Online bullying and harassment is when someone bullies or harasses someone else online. It includes a wide range of behaviours such as threats, sexual remarks and hate speech. In some situations, it can form a sustained pattern of behaviour.

Back to Top

Reporting abuse

In any situation that arises on social media, you will need to decide whether you want to engage in a discussion or ignore it, and whether the communication is abusive, intimidatory or threatening. When determining whether to engage or ignore, you'll need to balance the risks and likely success of either approach in stopping the situation.

If the communication is abusive, intimidatory or threatening, then keep a record of it (such as a screen shot). You can post that you find the communication abusive, intimidatory or threatening if you want to highlight the poor online behaviour and report it to the social media platform and to the police. You can also make your council aware that you have been subjected to online abuse, intimidation, or threats in your role as a Councillor so they can keep a record or take action as well. If you think there are threats to your personal safety or security, you can ask for advice from the police.

It may be useful to refer to our section on the legislation applicable to harassment and abuse to see if the communication falls into any of the categories so you can describe it to the police in these terms.

Perhaps most distressing is when multiple users all send abusive messages in quick succession or at the same time. This can be overwhelming and the structure of Twitter in particular means that the more posts and retweets, the more others see it, and they can be encouraged to add to the abuse. It can escalate very quickly. There are sadly some who will willingly add to the abuse for their own amusement, even if they are unaware of the details. This is a difficult situation to handle, particularly if the information is being held by another user. If this occurs, you are advised to make a record of the abuse, inform the social media platform, your council, and the police if any of the tweets make significant personal threats. You may wish to remove the original post if you can.

If someone has posted some inaccurate information about you or the council, and if the information is defamatory (a false statement that could harm your reputation), again, the first step is to gather evidence. You may then want to contact the individual initially to request that the tweet or post be deleted; some individuals may have made a mistake without malice and will remove their post immediately. Depending on the nature of the tweet or post and the number of followers who may have viewed the tweet, you may wish to seek a correction and/or an apology.

If this approach is unsuccessful or where a defamatory tweet or post causes serious concern or is part of a concerted campaign, in addition to informing your council, you may wish to take your own legal advice.

If the tweet or post is a complaint about a council service, you can ask for contact details and pass the information to officers to follow-up on and inform the individual that this is the course of action you are taking. This may help defuse any tensions.

Twitter

You may wish to unfollow, mute, or even block a person or group who is persistently tweeting you or is being abusive or intimidatory. Guidance about to mute and block is available from Twitter, but in summary.

- **Muting** allows you to remove an account's tweets from your timeline but does not go as far as unfollowing or blocking the account. Muted accounts will not know that they have been muted and you can 'unmute' them at any time.
- **Blocking** allows you to restrict specific accounts from contacting you, seeing your tweets or following you. Unlike muting, the perpetrators can find out that they have been 'blocked' and may accuse you of avoiding their scrutiny; this may be a small price to pay if their behaviour is checked and can be easily rebutted if necessary.

Twitter itself promotes 'Rules' encouraging constructive debate but it explicitly prohibits behaviour "that crosses the line into abuse, including behaviour that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another user's voice". If tweets are so offensive that you believe they violate Twitter's rules, you can report them to Twitter who may decide to take action. For further information about how to report 'violations' visit Twitter's how to report violations page.

Facebook

Facebook has slightly different 'Community Standards' to Twitter and alternative methods of dealing with complaints.

You are also more likely on Facebook to encounter community or campaign groups or pages which facilitate scrutiny of you, fellow Councillors, or the Council, and some will have been set up specifically with that purpose in mind. If these groups are not moderated effectively, they can provide a conduit for abuse and harassment.

If you are concerned about comments or postings about you in a group or page, you can report the post to the group administrator. If you concerned about a group that is abusive and you think it has broken Facebook's Community Standards, you can report the group to Facebook.

Blogs

Blogs are a quick and easy way for Councillors of the public or Councillors to set up mini websites to discuss and air views on matters of interest.

Occasionally, blogs may take an interest in local, community matters and some have been set up specifically to scrutinise the local council or Councillors. At other times, Councillors may face negative comments on their own blog. While scrutiny is a key part of local democracy and accountability, on occasions, some blogs may make unfair comments or untrue allegations or may include abusive or

threatening commentary. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, there are no 'community rules or standards' to moderate or challenge such content.

Social media dos and don'ts

Do

- talk to residents, staff, and others, do answer their questions
- trust your teams and staff to use social media
- be responsible at all times
- be respectful at all times
- be professional at all times
- be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion.
- innovate - different approaches work for different people
- have a personality - corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media
- share other people's helpful content and links
- credit other people's work, ideas, and links
- listen (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation)
- ask your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them)
- have a rota where appropriate - share the load and you'll get more from your accounts
- adhere to your existing HR policies - you don't need a separate HR policy especially for social media
- talk to your communications team - they are there to help you
- learn from others - there is rich learning of good practice social media use across local government via organisations such as the LGA
- use social media in the spirit in which it was intended - to engage, openly and honestly
- stop and ask for advice from an appropriate source if you are unsure about posting something
- make sure that your social media accounts are safe and protected with strong passwords and multiple-factor authentication where possible.
- understand privacy settings. There is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.
- consider personal mental health and well-being. Taking a break from social media from time to time can be beneficial.

Don't

- broadcast or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly
- block social media - social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk
- try to cover up mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- build accounts and just hope people will come - sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations
- assume that social media will look after itself - you will need to invest time, enthusiasm, and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells
- post content which will embarrass your council or yourself
- ignore legal advice, it's there to help you

- think that a disclaimer in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- expect your staff to make do with old technology which can be a barrier to effective working
- share your passwords with anyone other than your communications leads
- forget that social media is 24/7 - just because you leave at 5.00 pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile

Suggested social media rules of engagement for individual councillors

Clear rules of engagement can help a councillor or council to set out what their aims are, how they will behave and how they expect users on their account to behave.

These rules of engagement have been created specifically with issues of civility and respect in mind. However, they are wider reaching.

These suggested rules of engagement could be used on either a councillor's social media account or a council's account. They could be posted to social media in the account description, a pinned post/tweet or a link to a page on a website.

Welcome!

Hello and welcome to my/our social media page. I/we want to create a safe space for everyone in our community to engage on (insert social media platform). These rules of engagement have been created to set out what you can expect from me/us. They also set out what I/we expect of you if you wish to join in the discussion.

Rule 1: Be responsible and respectful

- Be open and honest.
- Be civil and respectful.
- Do not post anonymously or use a false name.
- Debate is fine, so long as it is carried out in a civil and respectful way.

Rule 2: Engage in positive conversations

- Actively participate in positive discussions.
- Be open to different points of view and others opinions.
- Share good news and success from our area.
- Share posts or content from other local organisations, groups and individuals where it is appropriate to do so.

Rule 3: Address poor conduct

- Do not spread false information or unsubstantiated accusations.
- Posts must not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.
- Posts must not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

- No social media user should have to put up with abusive or threatening behaviour. I/we reserve the right to delete content, block individuals or report individuals to social media platforms when necessary.

Back to Top

Further information and guidance

- LGA: Handling abuse on social media
- LGA: Social media dos and don'ts
- Connected Councillors: A guide to using social media to support local leadership and other guidance available on the Local Government Association website www.local.gov.uk
- LGA's Knowledge Hub may contain useful information
- Terms and conditions for Facebook
- Terms and conditions for Twitter

Back to Top