

Standards Committee

1 December 2017

Social Media Guidance



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

Purpose of the Report

1. To propose that the Committee develops some Guidance on the use of social media for Members of the Council.

Background

2. Members will be aware that a significant number of the complaints received about Councillors (parish or county) both nationally and locally relate to the perceived inappropriate use of social media platforms. The number of local complaints has been increasing. In 2014 and 2015 there were two complaints in each year on this issue. In 2016 there were nine, and in 2017 to date there have been sixteen. Particular issues are that it is not always clear to the public, or to Members themselves, when a councillor is acting 'as a councillor' and thus subject to the requirements of their relevant Code of Conduct. It is also not always clear where the difference lies between robust political debate and correspondence that is disrespectful (or worse) when the Code is engaged.
3. It is therefore considered appropriate to develop Guidance to assist councillors on this topic. The existing local guidance for Members on the issue is briefly contained in the Members' Handbook:

Members who choose to use social media such as facebook, twitter or blogs for political purposes or in their community leadership roles should make clear when they are expressing their own personal views. Members are reminded however, that they and what they say may be associated with the council and as such, they should be careful not [to] breach the law or the council's policies or code of conduct and should not bring the council into disrepute.

While political comment and democratic debate are welcome, action may be taken in instances where councillors post offensive or unlawful comments, videos or images, which can in any way be linked to the council and which breach its policies or damage its reputation. Where councillors post defamatory or unlawful comments, they run the risk of legal action being taken against them.

4. The issue has also been raised in Member Training, such as in the general induction training for new County Councillors on 15 May 2017, and again in a session on “Media and Social Media” delivered in July 2017. It was also covered at Code of Conduct training for Town and Parish Councillors in October 2017.
5. A number of other Councils have issued more extensive guidance to Members, in formats that largely distil the guidance issued by IDeA in March 2010 (“Connected Councillors: A guide to using social media to support local leadership”) and/or other guidance available on the Local Government Association website (www.local.gov.uk). It is suggested that any local guidance should be no more than a few pages in length, and should cover the key issues of ‘netiquette’, the interaction with the Code of Conduct, and the legal considerations that may apply to publication.

Recommendation

6. Members are asked to agree the proposal to develop social media guidance for Councillors and to request the Monitoring Officer to bring a further report to the next meeting of the Committee with a draft of the proposed guidance for consideration.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance - None

Staffing - None

Risk - None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty - None

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder - None

Human Rights - None

Consultation - None

Procurement - None

Disability Issues - None

Legal Implications - The Council has a duty under s. 27 of the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by its members and to adopt a code of conduct that is consistent with the Nolan Principles. It is anticipated that specific guidance on the use of social media by Members will help achieve compliance with this duty as well as potentially reducing the number of related complaints received about Councillors.