

Appendix 5

Social Media Guidance for Councillors

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Social media enables councillors to communicate directly with residents, businesses and stakeholders, increasing engagement and transparency in local democracy.
- 1.2 It increases our access to audiences and improves the accessibility of our communication. It enables us to be more active in our relationships with citizens, partners and stakeholders and encourages people to be involved in local decision making, enabling better engagement and feedback, ultimately helping to improve the services we provide.
- 1.3 At the same time, social media presents specific risks to public trust, individual safety, exposure of the Council to security risks and risks to the Council's reputation due to the speed, scale and permanence of online communication.
- 1.4 This guidance supports Councillors to use social media confidently and responsibly, while meeting the standards set out in the Members' Code of Conduct and complying with Data Protection and other legislation. It provides practical clarity on expectations in modern online environments.

2. Policy Statement

- 2.1 This guidance provides a structured approach to using social media and will ensure that the use of social media is effective, lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks.
- 2.2 Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly, in line with corporate policy. They must ensure that their use will not adversely affect the Council or its business, nor be damaging to the Council's reputation and credibility or otherwise violate any Council policies.

3. Status of this guidance

- 3.1 This document is supplementary guidance and must be read alongside the Members' Code of Conduct.
- 3.2 Breaches of this guidance may amount to a breach of the Code of conduct, depending on the circumstances.
- 3.3 The guidance is intended to:
 - support good judgement,
 - prevent harm and escalation,
 - and enable early, informal resolution where possible.

4 Risks

4.1 The following risks have been identified with social media use (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Damage to the Council's reputation.
- Social engineering attacks (also known as 'phishing').
- Bullying or "trolling". An internet "troll" is a person who starts arguments or upsets 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.
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.
- Breach of the Code of Conduct for Members through inappropriate use.

4.2 In light of these risks, the use of social media sites should be regulated to ensure that such use does not damage the Council, its employees, councillors, partners and the people it serves. As such this guidance aims to ensure:

- A consistent and corporate approach is adopted and maintained in the use of social media.
- Council information remains secure and is not compromised through the use of social media.
- Users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation.
- The Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

5 Scope

5.1 This guidance applies to all forms of online communication, including (but not limited to):

- Facebook pages and profiles
- X (Twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn
- blogs, forums and comment threads
- video and livestream platforms

5.2 The guidance applies whether a Councillor is using:

- an account created specifically for their councillor role, or
- a personal account where council business is discussed.

Residents will generally assume Councillors are acting in their official capacity when commenting on Council matters online.

6 Core responsibilities of Councillors online

6.1 When using social media in connection with Council business, Councillors are expected to:

- act with integrity, honesty and reasonable care
- treat others with respect and dignity
- avoid conduct that could reasonably bring the Council into disrepute
- uphold public confidence in lawful decision-making and governance
- abide by the Nolan Principles and the Code of Conduct

These principles apply equally online as they do in meetings or written correspondence.

6.2 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 libel action for which the individual Councillor will be personally liable.

6.3 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 almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

7. **Information integrity: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation**

7.1 Definitions

- **Misinformation:** inaccurate or incorrect information shared without intent to mislead.
- **Disinformation:** inaccurate information shared deliberately to mislead or inflame.
- **Malinformation:** information that may be true or partly true, but is shared selectively, without material context, or in a way that misleads or causes harm.

7.2 Why malinformation matters most

Malinformation presents a particular risk because:

- it can appear credible and authoritative,
- it is harder to correct than outright falsehoods,
- and it can significantly damage trust while remaining technically “true”.

Councillors should therefore take particular care with framing, tone, timing and context, not just factual accuracy.

7.3 The following are illustrative examples of what is likely to constitute malinformation:

- selectively listing negative facts to imply systemic failure while omitting relevant context or constraints
- reframing a lawful or factual Council clarification as evidence of coercion, bad faith or wrongdoing
- presenting speculation about motives or intent as established fact
- quoting partial extracts from reports, emails or statements in a way that changes their meaning

7.4 Examples that are not malinformation

- clearly labelled opinion or political disagreement
- robust criticism of decisions or processes that fairly reflects the known facts
- calling for transparency or scrutiny without emotive or misleading framing

8. Tone, respect and dignity of office

8.1 Councillors are entitled to challenge decisions and policies robustly. Healthy debate is a core part of democracy.

8.2 However, councillors should avoid language that:

- ridicules or mocks individuals
- undermines credibility or agency through insinuation
- frames lawful governance actions as inherently untrustworthy
- encourages contempt rather than scrutiny

8.3 This applies even where language falls short of explicit bullying or harassment. The test is whether a reasonable member of the public would see the behaviour as undermining dignity, respect or trust.

9. Scale, reach and amplification

9.1 Councillors should be mindful that:

- individual social media accounts may reach audiences larger than official Council channels
- repeated posting can dominate narratives and shape public perception
- impact is driven by amplification as well as content

9.2 Greater reach carries greater responsibility. Councillors should therefore exercise increased care when posting about live, sensitive or complex issues.

10. Managing comments and duty of care

10.1 Why comment management matters

Where a councillor publishes a post relating to Council business, they are responsible for the space they control.

Leaving abusive or threatening comments visible can:

- normalise harassment
- encourage escalation and pile-on behaviour
- be reasonably interpreted as tolerating such conduct

This engages the standards of respect, integrity and public confidence set out in the Code of Conduct.

10.2 Reasonable steps expectation

Councillors are not expected to police disagreement or remove criticism.

However, where comments under a post include abuse, harassment or threats, Councillors are expected to take reasonable and proportionate steps, such as:

- removing or hiding comments that are abusive, threatening or hateful
- posting a clear boundary-setting message (e.g. "Debate is welcome; abuse or threats are not")
- reporting comments that breach platform rules
- escalating credible threats through appropriate channels (Monitoring Officer / Police)

10.3 What may constitute a failure to moderate

Examples include:

- leaving visible personal insults or harassment while actively engaging in the thread
- allowing repeated abusive comments to remain unchallenged
- permitting language that encourages intimidation or hostility to escalate

Each case will depend on context, but inaction in the face of foreseeable harm may amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct.

11. Confidentiality, data protection and safeguarding

11.1 Councillors must not disclose confidential or exempt information online.

11.2 Personal data must be handled in line with data protection legislation.

11.3 Safeguarding responsibilities apply online. Concerns about exploitation, threats or vulnerable individuals should be reported promptly.

12. Personal safety and separation of roles

12.1 Councillors are strongly encouraged to maintain separate accounts for:

- councillor duties, and
- personal or family life.

12.2 Privacy settings should be used appropriately, but Councillors should assume that anything posted may become public.

12.3 Don't share personal information such as your personal phone number, date of birth, home address – or photos that make any of these obvious

13. If in doubt: pause and seek advice

13.1 If you are unsure whether a post:

- could mislead through framing or omission,
- relates to a live or sensitive issue,
- risks escalation or abuse in comments,

pause and seek advice from the Monitoring Officer before posting.

Early advice is always preferable to formal investigation.

14. Breaches and consequences

14.1 Serious or repeated breaches of this guidance may amount to a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct.

14.2 Some breaches (e.g. defamation, discriminatory language, data protection, electoral law) may also result in personal civil or criminal liability.

15 Key takeaway (the golden rule)

If you wouldn't say it in a public meeting, or allow it to be said unchecked in a room you were chairing, don't publish it — or leave it standing — online.

16. Guidance on Capturing Social Media Posts

16.1 Posts made using third party sites such as Facebook or X are not held by and are not within the control of the Council - posts can be deleted by site administrators without the knowledge or consent of the Council. In exceptional circumstances, copies of posts may be made and retained by the Council, in line with relevant Council procedures. These copies will be held for a period dependent on the type of investigation they are subject to.

16.2 Where inappropriate use is suspected, it is suggested that you should proactively attempt to capture any inappropriate posts before they might be deleted. Copies should be made and reported to the Monitoring Officer within the Council, as well as following the social media sites own reporting procedures where appropriate.

Dos and Don'ts

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- Do make use of stringent privacy settings if you don't want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality/privacy settings.
- Do not disclose personal details such as home addresses and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's Data Protection Policy.
- Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business – if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.
- Do not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public are present or it is of a confidential nature) or exempt reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985).
- Copyright laws still apply online. Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g. extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about or seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.
- Don't send or post inappropriate, abusive, bullying, hateful or defamatory messages to members of the public, other Councillors or Officers either in or outside the work environment. This includes content relating to protected characteristics, including but not limited to race, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, sex or age.
- The account should state that the views are those of the Councillor and that these may not represent the views of the Council.
- Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council related material on a personal account or website.
- Social media must not be used for actions that would put Councillors in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members. For example, don't publish on social media something you wouldn't say face to face, or at a public meeting.
- Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.
- Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, the Monitoring Officer and the Police.
- Where someone has posted a hateful or discriminatory comment on your personal blog or social media account, do inform the site administrator as soon

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as you become aware of the comment and consider reporting the matter to the Police.

- Do abide by the special rules that apply to social media posts and blogs during a local election period.

Further guidance is available for Councillors from the LGA. There is extensive guidance on their website on this link

[google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjggMzvgOuTAxXLUUEAHXWSGUQFnoECA4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.local.gov.uk%2Ffour-support%2Fcommunications-and-community-engagement%2Fsocial-media-guidance-councillors&usg=AOvVaw1G1pXhdtAld2ZSSJMKliT4&opi=89978449](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjggMzvgOuTAxXLUUEAHXWSGUQFnoECA4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.local.gov.uk%2Ffour-support%2Fcommunications-and-community-engagement%2Fsocial-media-guidance-councillors&usg=AOvVaw1G1pXhdtAld2ZSSJMKliT4&opi=89978449)

And in particular, there is guidance on infographics and rules of use of the Social Media website at [Digital citizenship: support and resources for councillors | Local Government Association](#) These can be added to the front page of Councillors' Social Media to make other users clear what acceptable behaviour is expected.