



SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE FOR COUNCILLORS

The use of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and 'blogging' can be effective methods for councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who might not normally have access to local councillors and politics.

The Council supports the use of such media, and encourages councillors to get online. However, in doing so you should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you would when making statements in person or in writing.

You also need to think about whether you are acting as a councillor, or giving the impression that you are representing the Council, as then the Members' Code of Conduct will apply.

To ensure that you comply with the Code of Conduct and to ensure that your use of online media is well received, the following general hints are suggested:

DO

- set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views
- be aware that the higher your profile as a councillor, the more likely it is that you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or tweet
- be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a councillor you are likely to be seen as acting in your official capacity
- make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect
- be aware that people are increasingly using social media as an alternative method of communication, for example to replace emails or telephone calls, and therefore make sure you regularly check and respond to any queries and issues raised.

DON'T

- blog or tweet in haste
- post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.

When the Code of Conduct May Apply

Bear in mind the Code when you blog or use social networking sites. You should pay particular attention to the following requirements of the Code:

- You must treat others with respect
- You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or the Authority into disrepute.¹

If you are using social media whilst working on Council business, you will still be subject to the Code of Conduct. This includes both when you are using social media to speak on behalf of the Council in accordance with any agreed media relations protocol and when you communicate about issues relating to Council functions as an individual councillor.

You are able to use social media to comment on Council decisions and advocate on particular issues relating to Council functions (and describe yourself as being a councillor when doing so) even if what you say has not been authorised by the Council. However, you should consider how you do this as it is likely to be covered by the Code of Conduct.

Laws Which May Apply

The Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003 apply to all users of social media, and prohibit the sending of a communication that is grossly offensive. Criminal prosecutions may be brought for serious breaches of these Acts.

Other Sources of Information and Guidance

The Local Government Association has produced an online guide for social media use which can be found here:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/digital-councils/get-started>

¹ NOTE: These requirements relate to the Common Code of Conduct for Leicestershire. Councils which have not adopted this Code may have similar but differently worded requirements.