

ANNEX – GUIDANCE FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Set out below are some key points and considerations for councillors on the use of social media.

1.1 General ‘Dos and Don’ts’ for Social Media

Do

- **be responsible and respectful** at all times
- **choose your platform** – different approaches work for different people. Some residents will prefer Twitter, others Facebook or Instagram – choose which platform suits you best and master one of them first before trying others
- have a **personality** – corporate speak and jargon will not be effective on social media
- **have a plan** for your account – set yourself some simple objectives for your account and then understand what content they are most likely to be interested in then create and share it at the times your audience are most likely to be on these channels.
- **use hashtags** but use them appropriately and strategically – your hashtag should also be your campaign ‘call to action’, objective or event hashtag, Make sure they are clean – e.g. they haven’t been used before
- **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.
- **monitor your accounts** daily and respond to questions same day
- **evaluate your accounts** – look at your analytics or insights. Understand which posts are getting most engagement – do more of what works well and stop doing the things which aren’t working for you
- **learn** from others – there is rich learning of good practice social media use across both public and private sector
- and more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to **engage openly and honestly**.

Don't

- **broadcast** or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot too many broadcasts and respond accordingly
- try to **cover up** mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- just **build accounts** and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations, such as Facebook groups, LinkedIn groups or Twitter Chats

- **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
- **assume that social media is 'free'**. It isn't – there is a cost for your time. Social media is a time-consuming activity and you have to consider this against your other work and priorities
- post content which will **embarrass** yourself – don't post any message on social media that you wouldn't happily say in a public meeting.
- **ignore** advice, it's there to help you
- think that a **disclaimer** in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- **share your passwords** with anyone and make it difficult to guess – don't have the name of your pet or your favourite football team as your password
- **don't** forget that **social media is 24/7** – your residents may be active out of normal office hours. It's a personal choice on how active you are on social media but to a degree you will get out of it what you put into it
- **Lastly and most importantly – don't argue on social media** – no one comes off well when you argue online. Imagine how that looks to other residents watching an argument taking place on social media. Answer questions honestly, be human and engaging. If someone is just trying to pick a fight with you step out and ignore it – don't rise to the bait.

1.2 Legal considerations

Councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else and need to be aware of the laws that apply to published material.

- (1) **Defamation**
If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation, you may be liable to pay damages.
- (2) **Copyright**
Publishing information that is not yours, without permission, may also result in an award of damages against you.
- (3) **Harassment**
It is an offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against a person that is likely to cause alarm, harassment or distress.
- (4) **Data Protection**
Avoid publishing the personal data of other people, including photographs, without their express permission to do so.

(5) **Incitement**

It is an offence to incite any criminal act.

(6) **Discrimination and ‘protected characteristics’**

It is an offence to discriminate against anyone based on protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010).

(7) **Malicious and obscene communications**

It is a criminal offence to publish anything that people would consider malicious or obscene communications.

Additional considerations that apply to Councillors:

(8) **Bias and Pre-determination**

Members sitting on regulatory committees such as planning or licensing should be aware they are allowed to have a view but not have gone so far as to have predetermined their position on a matter. Any views aired on social media 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 the ‘disrepute’ provision of the Code could be engaged.

(9) **Elections**

Particular care should be taken when using social media during the pre-election period. As good practice, your profile should display your full imprint details, and all digital campaign material should have an imprint saying who is behind the campaign and who created it. You can include a shortened link to your imprint in a tweet or post. (An imprint is added to election material to show who is responsible for its production and publication. It helps to ensure that there is transparency about who is campaigning and should therefore be clear and visible).

Websites and other electronic material during the pre-election period

As good practice, it is recommended to put an imprint on electronic material, such as websites and emails. The imprint should include the name and address of the promoter and the organisation on whose behalf it has been produced. You should include an imprint unless the size or format of the election material would mean that the imprint is not legible. Where it is impractical to place the full imprint on the election material you should consider how to provide some other means for the material to be associated with you. Any posters that are available for download from a website should carry the full imprint.

1.3 Members 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 either capacity when that is not their intention. Any social media account which could be potentially linked to a councillor would need to meet the standards of the code of conduct. The sections of the Code most likely to give rise to complaints are the requirements to treat others with respect; not to bring the office or councillor or the Council into disrepute; and prohibiting the disclosure of confidential information.

1.4 Use of Social Media During Committee Meetings

- (1) During meetings, councillors are encouraged to use Mobile devices to access the Modern.gov app and other information related to meetings. However, common sense and care should be taken when using social media during meetings. It is important for councillors not to give the impression that insufficient attention is being given to the discussion at the meeting, particularly at quasi-judicial meetings, as it 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 a Code of Conduct complaint for a failure to treat others with respect or of bringing the Council into disrepute.
- (2) Councillors should not post photographs taken at internal Members Seminars and 'closed to public' meetings on social media, unless express permission has been given by meeting organisers.
