

Part E9: Social Media Guidance for Councillors

SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE FOR COUNCILLORS OF COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

July 2022

What is the purpose of this Guidance and who does it apply to?

Cotswold District Council has always been committed to innovation and creativity in the digital revolution which has taken place over recent years. We actively encourage the use of social media, which has become an integral part of everyday life for many of us as it is a useful way to communicate and connect with people from all over the world.

This Guidance doesn't seek to inhibit "freedom of expression", and means that Councillors are generally free to talk about, or write about, or otherwise, express their ideas and opinions without any censorship or interference - subject only to a few exceptions.

In respect of Councillors, social media has many benefits including raising a Councillor's profile, helping to deliver information to constituents in a fast and effective manner and for improving reputation. However, there are also many ways in which Councillors may use social media inappropriately, and this can have long lasting consequences for Councillors, and the Council's reputation.

The Social Media Guidance for Councillors ('the Guidance') is intended to assist Councillors when using social media, in a personal or professional capacity, to avoid potential breaches of their Code of Conduct. Whilst Standards matters are and dealt with on a case by case basis, this Guidance is designed to assist Councillors on what is and isn't appropriate behaviour when using social media.

Importantly, this Guidance should be read in conjunction with the Council's Code of Conduct for Councillors.

Who is this Guidance for?

The Guidance applies to all Councillors of Cotswold District Council.

Pros and Cons of Social Media



The Code of Conduct

Councillors are personally responsible for their conduct online and should always be mindful of the Code of Conduct and the Nolan Principles.

'Acting in Capacity' as a Councillor

This is a subjective test. However, there are actions which increase the likelihood of a Councillor being found as 'acting in their capacity as a Councillor'. For example, by identifying that they are a Councillor on their profile page, by using social media to campaign or to share Council news/developments with the public.

A Councillor may wish to consider the following when using social media:

- Keep separate accounts for professional and private matters

By having one account which incorporates both a Councillor's professional and personal life, Councillors are increasing the risk of being found as acting in their capacity if a complaint is made.

- If a Councillor wishes to keep just one account, be clear on what the account is used for. For example, if the account is personal, keep it private and refrain from using Council or Councillor terminology or referring to your role as a Councillor.
- While a Councillor may make a distinction on social media about what is a personal account/content and what is a Council business account/content, that does not mean what a Councillor posts on a personal account is private, and it could be shared by other people in public forums or used by the media.

General Responsibilities When Using Social Media

In addition to the Code of Conduct, Councillors should be mindful of the following responsibilities:

- Councillors should take particular care to ensure that, in any comment or post they create, they do not imply that they are speaking on behalf of the Council as a whole.
- Once a post is made on social media, it is there for the world to see. Even if it is deleted this does not mean that someone has not already saved a copy of it. Councillors should never post anything on social media that they would not be prepared to discuss in public meetings, with the local media, with their constituents, and with their friends and family. Councillors should think carefully before engaging in activity on social media.
- Councillors should be honest about who they are on social media and not impersonate anybody if it could lead to bringing the Council into disrepute.
- Councillors should be mindful of the safety of themselves, their families and others. Any information posted to social media is public including pictures, profile information, friends list and comments. Individuals will be able to see your information and link you to other people, which may include vulnerable children and adults.
- Councillors should only share accurate information from reliable sources and should be mindful of 'fake news' stories and outlets. It's evidenced that anonymous profiles can contribute to the spread of misinformation or fake news, as well as cyberbullying, trolling and hate crime.
- Councillors should be trustworthy and not use social media to divulge any confidential or exempt information which has been shared with them.
- Councillors should keep their social media accounts secure and protected by passwords. They should not allow anybody else access to any of their social media platforms.
- Councillors should remain professional and polite when conversing with members of the public. This includes the use of private messaging, commenting on posts or replying.
- The way we interact with people in person is not just limited to the things we say. Body language, expression, tone of voice and who we are speaking to are all contributing factors to interaction. Considering this, Councillors should always consider how any comment/post they make on social media could be construed.
- Councillors should be mindful of the public perception of using social media during Council meetings and consider whether it is appropriate.

Dealing with Harmful Rumours and Mis-information.

It is difficult not to engage when you are the subject of rumours, misinformation and smear campaigns. While it is always tempting to respond and clarify every rumour and falsehood circulated about you, it is also useful to think about the emotional, economic and time costs of engaging as in many cases, rumours disappear as quickly as they emerged. Councillors from other local authorities have shared some strategies they have found useful to deal with this.

Calmly try to understand who is behind the attack. Most of the time, they are people with a clear agenda trying to gain control or to manipulate.

Correct the facts. This can be done with a formal statement or if you can identify the source, then do it publicly by correcting their posts with facts and evidence. Remember that Officers are there to give advice, support and provide factual information.

Remember that rumours and misinformation are fed by repetition. It is good to defend your reputation but Councillors find that the most efficient way is to do it once and then stop engaging this way.

Leave the environment the rumour is being spread within. A smear campaign tries to manipulate and gain control but no control can be gained if you do not participate. You may wish to advise your followers that you will be logging out of social media for a period of time, which gives the rumour time to calm down while protecting your own emotional and mental wellbeing.

Rumours and smear campaigns can be very stressful and at times, they can feel very isolating. Keep your self-confidence by talking to family, friends and others in your support network. Some may also feel able to counteract rumours with factual information.

If you can identify the source of the rumours and smear campaigns, you should document it and keep a record. This may be useful if further disciplinary or legal action is required.

Potential Legal Issues

Councillors should be mindful that, in addition to a potential breach of the Code of Conduct, misuse of social media may give rise to other consequences. The following issues, which may lead to criminal or civil legal proceedings, may also arise:

- Data Protection
- Publication of Obscene Material
- Incitement
- Copyright
- Harassment
- Discrimination
- Bias
- Defamation
- Judicial Review

Training

Training on the use social media will be made available to Councillors.

The LGA has also published a Checklist for Councillors. This can be found at Appendix A.

If you are unsure, or have any questions about your social media use, contact the Monitoring Officer.

Review

This guidance will be reviewed periodically by the Constitution Working Group.

Appendix A

LGA Checklist for Councillors

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/digital-communications/social-l>

Be a person

In the words of Digital Specialist [Euan Semple](#), "Organisations don't tweet, people do". You are likely to be more effective if your social media profile is you (with a picture of you) rather than an organisation with a logo.

Don't worry about reaching everyone in your ward

Social media will be more effective in some wards than others. University towns, urban areas with good broadband and mobile connections, and a working age population tend to work best. Wards with an older population and poor internet connectivity tend not to be so effective at reaching your ward. However don't let this stop you as connections are getting continuously improving as we move towards a higher level of digital inclusion.

Don't let it replace your traditional work

To be an effective councillor you won't stop meeting people and posting leaflets simply because you are posting online. The traditional work of a councillor still has to be done. You will know your residents best—consider which channel works best for them to connect with you, online and offline.

Think about the platform you'll use

If people in your ward are keen Facebook users then think seriously about Facebook. Twitter is popular among politicians because it's easy to use and connects people really well. Whichever one you choose, learn one at a time before even thinking of trying something else. You will know your residents better than anyone else so ask them which channel works best for them.

See how other councillors use it

Watch and learn from other councillors who are using social media. Have a chat to them. You'll very often find they will be happy to talk. Even to those from different parties.

Don't be a slogan machine

There is a really important decision to be taken over how political to be. You may have been elected on a party political ticket. But you are also a rounded human being. Social media is a chance for you to show your human side. Just posting party political content is likely to switch many people off and you may be talking only to the party faithful.

Have a conversation

Social media works best as a two-way conversation connecting people and sharing information. Good councillors do this every day face-to-face with residents—social media should be no different to this.

Don't wait for people to come to you

You've got your Facebook profile or your Twitter profile. People won't just come flocking to you. Run a search on your chosen profile for the name of your ward or an issue. Make a connection. Join a Facebook group set-up by residents. Comment on a blog, a website or a video clip.

Think about times when you won't post

From experience, many elected members say that Friday and Saturday nights are not always the best time to post overtly political messages. You won't always get the most rounded debates. Many councillors post sparingly on religious holidays.

To post in meetings or not?

Some authorities frown on posting from social media in meetings. Check the situation where you are. Residents, residents groups, journalists and bloggers are being encouraged to use social media from meetings. So adding your voice to the conversation may be a good thing as part of democracy. If you can post an update from a meeting and it doesn't hamper your role in that meeting then it's something to think about.

Don't have a row

Robust debate is fine from time-to-time and it's part of the cut and thrust of local politics. Most people can accept that. But remember how this debate is playing out to passers-by who are not interested in the detail of the issue. They are likely to be switched off. Take the row offline with a phone call or an email.

Don't be abusive

An absolute 'no no' is abusing people online. It doesn't work. It will make you look awful and is a sure-fire way to land you in trouble with your electorate, the party and the council. Be professional. Don't say anything you wouldn't be happy saying in a public meeting with the Press there.

Don't discuss case work detail

Case work can be reported to you on social media. Everything from uncollected rubbish and a cracked paving slab to concerns about child protection. As a good rule of thumb, ask residents to tell you the detail of an issue offline. Social media platforms usually have an easy-to-use way to talk one-to-one. Email and telephone can come into play too.

Pictures work

People respond really well to pictures. They don't have to be print quality. They don't have to be posed. If you are on a ward walk post some pictures. Include the people

you are with if they are happy with that. Post pictures that show your human side too. That sunrise you just noticed. Your dog. Things that make you human.

Enjoy it

It's not meant to be scary. It's not meant to be hard work. Relax. Be yourself. Be a responsible elected member. Enjoy it.