

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY FOR COUNCILLORS

1. Purpose

Social media can be a valuable tool in engaging with local residents, businesses and other stakeholders. This policy is intended to help Members to use social media in an effective and appropriate way that avoids legal and reputational risk.

The policy sets out guidelines for the use of social media by Councillors and should be read in conjunction with the Members' Code of Conduct.

2. What is Social Media?

Social media is a term describing a range of websites and online tools that enable people to create and share content and interact with others. This includes blogs and postings on a wide range of social media platforms including (but not limited to) Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, Instagram and Snapchat.

You do not have to use social media to fulfil your role as a local Councillor. However, for those Members who are keen to be involved, the use of social media can help to increase your local profile, as well as enabling you to reach out to local residents and stay in touch with local views.

3. Legal Issues

The more informal nature and immediacy of social media can make it easy to forget that the same laws apply as to any other form of written communication. When using social media, Members need to be aware of the following issues:

- **Libel** – legal action may be taken against you if you publish an untrue statement about someone which is damaging to their reputation. This also applies if someone else publishes something defamatory on your website or blog which you are aware of but do not take swift action to remove. A successful claim could result in the award of damages against you.
- **Copyright** – the laws relating to copyright also apply to information posted online so do not post extracts or photos from copyrighted publications without permission. Again, a successful claim for breach of copyright would be likely to lead to an award of damages against you.
- **Data Protection** – do not publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their express permission, and it is appropriate to do so in any event.
- **Bias and Pre-determination** – If you are involved in making planning, licensing or other quasi-judicial decisions, you need to be careful on social media that you do not make comments that suggest you have made up your mind on an issue that is yet to be formally decided. This could lead to a

potential challenge to a Committee decision.

5. Social Media and the Members' Code of Conduct

Whenever you post or engage in social media, you are likely to be regarded as acting in your capacity as a Councillor and must therefore comply with the Members' Code of Conduct in what you publish and what you allow others to publish. When posting on social media, you will need to be particularly aware of the following aspects of the Code and their practical application:

- **Treat others with respect** – do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments;
- **Comply with equality laws** – do not publish anything that might be seen as contrary to equalities legislation which protects individuals from unfair treatment on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy ;
- **Do not bully or harass anyone** – do not say anything that might be construed as bullying or intimidation;
- **Do not bring the Council into disrepute** – you should not publish anything that could reasonably be perceived as bringing your office or the Council into disrepute;
- **Do not disclose confidential information** – in your use of social media, just as in any other circumstances, you must not disclose exempt information you have received in your role as a Councillor. You should also not disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone or information acquired by you which you believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature.

Advice and guidance is available from the Communications Team to support you in your use of social media.

6. Social Media and Council Meetings

Use of social media during a meeting can give the impression that a Councillor is not concentrating on the business in hand, as well as potentially causing disruption to the meeting. For this reason, the use of mobile phones or other handheld electronic devices is not permitted during Council meetings, other than for the purpose of accessing the agenda and other associated documents for that meeting.

In Bexley all Council, Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny and Planning Committee meetings are webcast so tweeting on meeting progress is unnecessary.

7. Guidelines for Members

The Golden Rules attached to this policy are intended to support Members in to get the best from social media whilst avoiding some pitfalls that might arise.

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Golden Rules

It is important when using social media to be aware of the possible pitfalls. However follow these golden rules and there is no reason why you cannot use social media successfully and positively in your role as a Councillor.

Do:

- Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or social media profile – especially if you have private, non-political accounts. Consider having a separate account for the public and an account for your personal/family connections.
- 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 if you comment or add to what someone else has posted on social media, you may be associated with that person or post or be assumed by readers to support or agree with their views.
- As an elected Member, when you blog or network, whatever you post is likely to be seen as in your official capacity.
- Be clear about the capacity in which you are publishing material. Consider keeping your personal and elected Member profile on social networking sites separate.
- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries.
- Be aware that any communication can be misinterpreted and this is particularly true of social media where there is no face to face contact. Be aware that irony or humour can be misinterpreted or misrepresented;
- Remember that information and comments that you make can be broadcast to a large number of people more quickly than through any other medium;
- Minimise security risks by using strong passwords for social media accounts (don't use the same one as for your main Bexley account) and change them regularly. Protect your devices with a pin to restrict access and prevent misuse. Be mindful that social media sites are sometimes used to distribute malicious software or code.
- Show respect and consideration for others. Comments, including those presenting a differing opinion, are a distinct part of social media and it is okay to agree to disagree. The use of blocking and muting should always be seen as a last resort.

Don't:

- Blog or post on social media in haste, particularly in circumstances where your judgement might be impaired; for example if you are tired or have consumed alcohol. Always pause before publishing.
- Post comments that you would not be prepared to make on paper or face to face. What you say on social media is recorded and is permanent so make sure that your online content and comment is accurate and thought through.
- Use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.
- Use social media in any way to attack, insult, abuse, defame or otherwise make negative, offensive or discriminatory comments about Council staff, service users, their family or friends, colleagues, other professionals, other organisations or the Council.
- Publish confidential information that you may have learned or had access to as part of your role as an elected Member. This includes personal information about service users, their families or friends, contractors, Council staff as well as Council-related information.
- Represent your personal views, or those of any political party or interest group you belong to, as being those of the Council on any social medium.
- Browse, download, upload or distribute any material that could be considered inappropriate, offensive, defamatory, illegal or discriminatory.