



## **Cambridgeshire County Council**

### **Social Media Code for Councillors**



#### **Introduction**

Social media is the term used for online tools, websites and interactive media that enable users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. This guidance covers social media on social networking sites, blogging, and tweeting. Social media 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 which should ultimately help improve the services we provide.

Cambridgeshire County Council ("the council") recognises that social media provides an effective platform for understanding, engaging and communicating with residents on issues of general importance to the community. Nevertheless, the council also recognises that the use of social media can pose risks to its reputation and that of members. It considers that clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure that their use does not expose the council to security risks, reputational damage or breach the Data Protection Act.

It is not a requirement for Members to use social media to fulfil their roles however, where it is used this Code will be relevant. Any communication is capable of being misinterpreted or misrepresented and whilst the use of social media should not be more susceptible to this problem than any other form of communication, the immediacy and often rapid and wide broadcasting can magnify the problem and create controversy where it wasn't expected. This doesn't mean that Members cannot, in the appropriate context, communicate politically but care should be taken to ensure that the tone and content is no different to that expected of a verbal communication.

The purpose of this Code is to support the use of social media through the provision of guidance and clarity as to what constitutes acceptable usage in ensuring compliance with the Council's legal obligations and the general standards of conduct expected of members.

#### **Purpose**

This guidance applies to councillors in respect of their use of social media as part of their public role as well as offering advice on social media issues they may face in their personal life. It sets out how to use social media, how to effectively manage social media usage and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated.

Social media is a term used to describe websites and online tools which allow people to interact with each other by creating their own content examples of which include but are not limited to:

- Social Networking sites (e.g. Facebook)
- Micro-blogging services (e.g. Twitter)
- Video sharing services (e.g. YouTube)
- Photo sharing services (e.g. Instagram)
- Online gaming and virtual reality (e.g. World of Warcraft)

- Messaging services (e.g. Whatsapp)
- Business Networking sites (e.g. LinkedIn)

This Code applies to the use of social media when members are acting, or perceived to be acting, in their official capacity and/or as a representative of the authority and whether or not it is accessed using the Council's ICT facilities and equipment.

Councillors must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly and that their use will not adversely affect the council or its business, nor be damaging to the council's reputation and credibility. Non-compliance with this Code may result in a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct and a request to remove any postings which are deemed inappropriate.

The following sections of the policy provide users with common-sense guidelines and recommendations for using social media responsibly and safely.

## **KEY PRINCIPLES**

### **Practices to Avoid**

- Do not do anything to jeopardise the council's obligations under the Freedom of Information Act and Data Protection Act such as citing or referencing residents, partners or suppliers without their written approval. Be aware that content on such social media websites may be subject to Freedom of Information requests.
- Do not misappropriate or infringe the intellectual property of other organisations and individuals which could create liability for the council as well as themselves.
- Do not say anything through social media that suggests you have made your mind up on an issue that is due to be formally decided (particularly important on planning issues). While your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence, and were genuinely open to a different view, in order to avoid allegations of predetermination or bias.
- Do not write or report on conversations, meetings or matters that are meant to be confidential or internal to the council such as those held in exempt session or prior to the publication of reports.
- Do not provide references for individuals on social or professional networking sites as this creates a legal liability.
- Do not blog or tweet in haste, particularly in circumstances where your judgement might be impaired; for example, if you are tired or have consumed alcohol.
- Do not 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.
- Do not browse, download, upload or distribute any material that could be considered inappropriate, offensive, defamatory, illegal or discriminatory.
- Do not, in your role as a Councillor, use social media to promote personal financial interests. This includes the promotion of particular commercial activities that Council representatives may have an interest in.

## Examples of Good Practice

- The Members' Code of Conduct will only apply to you when you are, or appear to be acting in your official capacity, so it must be clear that expressions of personal opinion are appropriately distinguished. For the avoidance of doubt, do consider keeping your personal and political accounts separate or where this is inconvenient use clear expressions of intent such as 'speaking entirely personally' or 'the views expressed here are my personal opinion'. Consider also installing appropriate privacy settings for your personal accounts.
- Do ensure your official use of social media is compliant with the Members' Code by ensuring that your profile and any content is consistent with the council's professional image and obligations for instance:
  - ***Treat others with respect*** - do not use social media in any way to attack, insult, abuse, defame or otherwise make negative, offensive or discriminatory comments about residents, council staff and services, other Members and/or organisations or leave on your web or social media pages comments made by others which may be equally damaging/defamatory.
  - ***Comply with equality laws*** – do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith. Never bully or harass anyone – do not say anything, particularly if it is part of a series of similar comments about a person or on a theme 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 reflecting badly upon or lowering the reputation of yourself or the Council.
  - ***Do not disclose confidential information*** - you must not, in your use of social media, just as in any other circumstances, 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.
- Do be mindful that what you publish will be in the public domain for a long time and can't be easily retracted once published.
- Do be aware that the higher your profile as an elected member the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity. Equally, be aware that you will be seen as acting in your official capacity if you publish information that you could only have accessed by being an elected member.
- Do use social media to add value to the environment in which you are participating and to provide worthwhile information and perspective to residents.
- Do tolerate disagreement - some comments may not accord with your views and deleting the comments of people who disagree with you can backfire. The same comments can appear elsewhere from with the possibility of linking them back to your site with accusations of gagging.
- Do avoid the difficult users, don't get bogged down, you don't have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary.
- Do exercise caution in requesting or accepting a Council employee or contractor providing services to the Council as a "friend" on a social networking site where this can suggest close personal association.

- Do use secure passwords and never share your password with anyone. If you are using shared IT equipment don't store your password on the computer.
- Do be aware of your own safety and ensure that anything you publish does not leave you vulnerable. Any Councillor receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, Members' services and /or the Police.
- Do be aware that what you say on social media will likely attract interest from the media and may well result in a news story, in the same way comments you make in the council chamber would do. For example, a throw away comment about a fellow member could result in a big news story that you had not intended which could damage your own reputation and that of the council.
- Do double-check that information you post on social media is accurate before you publish it and if in any doubt, don't publish.
- Do try to avoid engaging the council's social media accounts in political conversations, as these accounts are managed by council officers for the benefit of residents to inform them of services and news. They should not be used for political purposes.

### **Responsibilities of councillors**

- You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media, in the same way that you are responsible for letters or emails you send.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 are Part 2 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, racist or defamatory messages to members of the public, other councillors or officers either in or outside the work environment
- Elections - the council will not promote councillors' social media accounts during the pre-election period and councillors should take extra care with what they post at this time.
- In any biography, the account should state the views are those of the councillor in question and 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 example, don't publish on social media something you wouldn't want to 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, Democratic Services and/or the police.
- It is recommended that in the case of Facebook, councillors wishing to keep their personal life and role as a councillor separate create a Facebook page which members of the public can like rather than using their personal profiles.

This guidance is not exhaustive and if you have any queries you should contact the council's Monitoring Officer.