

Report on Social Media Presence for Parish Councils

Key Points

- Social media can be very useful in getting feedback on proposals and communicating information about councillors' activities. However, remember that not everybody is on social media and so opinions expressed may not be representative.
- Social media is always on, so consider setting personal limits and establishing your own routine. You have no obligation to respond to posts and comments at any speed but it is often helpful to explicitly indicate that to users.
- Councillors are subject to the council's code of conduct when using social media.
- Consider the content of your communications carefully and apply this test – if you would be reluctant to say it face-to-face or in an official email, then it is probably inappropriate to say online.
- Once something is posted on social media, it is difficult to retain control over how it will be used. Think about this when posting.
- Different platforms allow for different types of interactions. It is useful to indicate the aims and intended audiences of your different accounts.

Why you may find social media useful

Social media has become an every-day communications tool for councillors and the people they represent, and the potential for councillors using social media is huge. Social media allows you to be innovative and responsive as well as providing links to useful sources of information or sign-posting to other organisations.

In addition, it is a useful source of intelligence:

- People will talk about local issues, their concerns and interests.
- You can find out about breaking news, the latest research or publication or the latest policy announcements from organisations such as the LGA.
- People often have little understanding of the councillor role and may have negative perceptions, but social media can give people a taste of your personal life and remind them that you are similar to them.
- Residents can be made aware of and provide feedback to your work and campaigns, including mobilising support and interest and gathering followers.
- You can have conversations with people who do not traditionally seek out their local representatives.
- Social media allows for immediate communication. You can pass on information and receive opinions in minutes. You can forward information from other people equally quickly (bearing in mind that you would then share equal responsibility in law for anything later seen to be untrue or defamatory)
- The local and sometimes national press will follow councillors on Twitter or Facebook. Social media is a growing source for stories for news outlets as each tweet or comment is effectively a mini-press release.

Responsibilities of Councillors on social media

Councillors are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of social media. Publishing an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a defamation action for which you will be personally liable. The same applies if you pass on any similar untrue statements you receive.

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.

You can make use of stringent privacy settings if you do not want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. It is advisable to read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality / privacy settings.

Some councillors choose to have separate social media profiles for personal and council use. It is important to keep in mind, however, that even the strictest privacy settings is no guarantee for posts or actions to remain private. As a rule of thumb, never post anything online you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.

The code of conduct for members and relevant legislation continues to apply online and in social media. If you are referring online in any way to your role as a councillor, you are deemed to be acting in your “official capacity” and any conduct may fall within the code.

Managing and moderating your own group or page

You may wish to set up your own councillor or community page on Facebook. These are valuable platforms to promote local information, news, events or council developments or seek people’s views on community or council proposals.

Members of the community and others can contribute and comment in an interactive manner and whilst most is constructive and uses acceptable language, some individuals may use bad language or ‘cross the line’ into abuse or harassment.

It is useful to indicate at the top of the page, what the purpose of the page is and what the intended audience is.

If you are a Group or Page administrator, Facebook provides you with a range of tools to manage and moderate other people’s content or contributions to your Group or Page for more serious breaches of standards.

You can:

- block certain words or apply a 'profanity filter' in the settings, this will stop such postings appearing in your page
- hide or delete comments, photos or tags
- ban or remove someone from your pages

Useful guidance and instructions are available on the 'Banning and Moderation' section of Facebook.

Administering a large Group can be a lot of work, particularly if group members are active. If that's the case, you might want to share the responsibility with other councillors, friends or trusted community members. [Guidance](#) on making other people or administrators is available on Facebook.

If the Parish Council decided to have a social media presence then a social media policy will need to be created.