

A Councillors' guide to using social media

(July 2014)

Social media is a collective term used to describe easy ways to create and publish on the internet. People generally use the term to describe how organisations and individuals share content – text, video and pictures – and create conversations on the web. It is transforming the way that companies do business and individuals interact with each other. It is providing a voice for those who weren't well heard before. Social media will change the way that councillors and councils interact with local people. Councillors, councils and their partners are using social media for a wide range of purposes. It is being used as a way to spark innovation, drive efficiency and engage in conversations with local people. As well as using social media themselves, members should ensure that their local authority as an organisation is using it well.

Social media is usually fairly open, meaning a wide variety of people can see, comment on or collaborate on materials. The tools are usually free or low-cost and very often easy-to use, requiring no more skill than adding an attachment to an email or creating a Word document. And most importantly, social media is designed to be shareable, meaning that it's very easy for people to forward, link to or even re-publish content. This means there are very low barriers to entry for sharing opinions with a potentially very wide audience.

Attached at Appendix 1 is more detail about the types of social media that exist.

Attached at Appendix 2 are some tips for establishing a presence online.

It is not appropriate for the Council, through its officers, to provide technical advice or support to Councillors who wish to set-up and maintain a profile using social media (though some basic hints and tips are appended to this paper). This is because social media profiles of Councillors will inevitably span council business as well as political business. However queries about the Member Code of Conduct relating to the use of social media, where these are not answered by this Guidance, should be addressed to the Monitoring Officer (monitoring-officer@leicester.gov.uk).

Legal issues... staying out of trouble online

(This advice was originally provided by Victoria McNeill, Solicitor, Practice Director, nplaw)

Any form of communication is rife with the possibility of misunderstandings. Social media is perhaps no more or no less vulnerable to this, but there are some new ways to misfire with your message. Although the best use of social media is conversational in tone, publishing to the web is still publishing. What you've 'said' on the web is written down and it's permanent. If you would not say it to someone, then don't write it on social media. Even where you would say it, think before you write it on social media.

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional

duties around using their social media for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on regulatory (planning or licensing) matters.

- **Libel**

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

- **Copyright**

Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

- **Data Protection**

Do not publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

- **Bias and pre-determination**

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest you have a closed mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

- **Obscene material**

You should avoid publishing anything that people would consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

- **Electoral periods**

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from their website. Lastly, there are much stricter protocols in place during the very specific window of time preceding an election and the Council issues separate guidance about this nearer the time.

- **The council's legal position**

Some Councils take a strict line and do not provide links to individual councillor social media accounts from councillor profile pages. At Leicester City Council our corporate stance is relaxed at this time. In addition to councillors' info at <http://www.cabinet.leicester.gov.uk>, we have a longstanding content area at <http://councillor.leicester.gov.uk/councillors.aspx> where councillors can also publish material themselves on what they do, their campaign issues/local interests etc. Those Members who have used this platform have signposted their blogs and social media profiles. The landing page for this area features a disclaimer

making it clear that the Council do not endorse or share the views expressed on these pages.

The position of the City Mayor (who is not a Councillor) is slightly different. As a directly elected Mayor he has a unique legal status as possessor of Executive decision-making power. The City Mayor pages on the Council's website give factual information about him and his role, as well as narrative detail about his policies and vision. All such information complies with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011)

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

The Members' Code of Conduct

Councillors can have 'blurred identities'. This means you have a social media account where you comment both as a councillor and as an individual. For example a Facebook account where you've posted about a great night out (personal) and another time explained the council position on pothole repair (councillor). It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor, but it could be less clear to others. Such blurred identities might for example have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. So it's worth mentioning the need to get your on social media accounts/ profiles clear, then you can be confident as to what you can and can't say while you are representing your organisation or party.

Councillors should be careful to protect their brand/name, over and above a private citizen. Think carefully about the tone you use and what you choose to say. You are a public figure, and will be judged by the way you present yourself, and how successfully you strike a balance between your roles/identities.

How you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. There is a difference between communicating on behalf of the council (for example blogging as a councillor) or as a private citizen, and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter. The key to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a councillor. And that stands whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

This may be less than clear if you have a private blog or a Facebook profile. There are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgement than a hard and fast line. For example, a Standards Committee may take into account how well known or high profile you are as a councillor, the privacy settings on your chosen social media platform, the content of the site itself and what you say on it. Most councillors are

using their online profile to communicate with citizens about representing their local area so engaging the Code, if necessary, should be a relatively straightforward decision. Since the judgement of whether you are perceived to be acting as a councillor will be taken by someone else, it's safest to assume that any online activity can be linked to your official role.

Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake. Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- **Treat others with respect**

Avoid personal attacks and disrespectful, rude or offensive comments.

- **Comply with equality laws**

Take care in publishing anything that might be considered sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.

- **Refrain from publishing anything you have received in confidence**

- **Do not use resources improperly**

For example do not use Council provided technology for party political purposes.

- **Ensure you don't bring the council, or your councillor role, into disrepute**

Members of the public (or other Elected Members or officers) may make a complaint about you if you contravene the Code of Conduct. That complaint, and the sanctions that may be imposed, will be considered by the Standards Committee.

Strategies to avoid getting it wrong

There are few additional things to be aware of to ensure you are well-respected online. For those new to the online world it can take a short time to get used to the culture of the web.

Maintain good 'netiquette'

- **Make your commenting policy clear**

You will need to take note of the comments that other people make on your site. It may be a fine line to tread, but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand on your site then it can put off other members of your community and you may even be called to account under the Code of Conduct. For blogs, the easiest way to handle this is to moderate comments and to state clearly on your site that you're doing so and reasons why comments may be rejected. For Facebook or other social networks, including multi-media sites like YouTube and Flickr where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to regularly check on messages (you can be notified by email) or, far less preferably, disable message posting.

- **Allow disagreement**

Some comments may be out of line, but on the other hand deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will backfire. You can't stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, then linking back to your site and saying you are gagging those who disagree with you.

- **Think before you publish**

Words can't be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off blog post or tweet it will probably have already been read and will be indexed or duplicated in places on the web beyond your reach.

Few writers are able to communicate sarcasm or irony through short online messages. It's probably best to assume that you're one of those that can't.

- **Own up: Social media is transparent**

The best bloggers admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake – perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with online misfires.

- **Avoid the trolls**

As you begin to use social media, you'll find some argumentative characters out there. Don't get bogged down. You don't have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary. Report online abuse and threats to the police, group whip and to the Council as appropriate.

What is Social Media?

When people talk about social media, they often make reference to some well-known tools or products. Although there are many more than we can list here, we'll highlight a few of the general approaches and the most widely used products which are characterised by their ease of use and are free or low cost. We've attempted to categorise these tools below.

A. Written communication

Blogs

Blogs are easily updated web journals, usually published by an individual or a small group. They are almost always commentable, meaning readers can share their opinions about what the author has written. Blogs have been used by councillors to share their views on public policy, share information about council services or issues of local interest, and canvas opinion. Even very 'business-oriented' local government blogs have a personal feel with bloggers sharing some detail of their daily lives, for example sharing how changes in local services have affected them, how much they enjoyed taking their kids to the village fete, or sharing pictures of tasty local produce.

Blogging has been around longer than most of the tools described here, but it is still one of the most powerful. Many councillors use a blog as the bedrock of their social media strategy.

Twitter

Twitter was the social media phenomenon of 2009 and is still growing. It's a way of sharing short snippets of information, links to interesting resources, telling people what you are doing or asking for help. Users are limited to 140 characters (letters, numbers, spaces and punctuation), so it's ideal for sending and receiving text information on the go. It can be used as a one-way publishing tool, pushing out short bursts of information, and many councils use it this way through corporate accounts. However, it's more powerful as a conversational tool, with councillors and local people sharing information and getting feedback.

Many councillors are already using Twitter. You can see a growing list at www.tweetyhall.com, a website that features councillors' use of social media to support local engagement.

On Twitter, people are all identified in the same way, by an @ sign and their username. For example, someone could be registered as @jonsmith, or @governmentmike. You can find their Twitter address by using their full user name without the @ sign

B. Social networking (Facebook)

All of the tools we describe in this guide have an element of social networking, but there are a number of very popular sites dedicated to building social networks. Social networking means using online tools to build communities of individuals who are interested in sharing information and support. Networks like Facebook can be used to facilitate connections

between people who already know each other, usually in a social context. But it can also be used by organisations and businesses to share information about products, services or events with a range of interested individuals. Other social networking tools like LinkedIn are built around professional identities, where the focus is specifically on an individual's career, and often their job search or developing business leads.

Using social networks as a councillor requires a different approach to using it as an ordinary citizen. Many councillors use Facebook in a personal capacity in the same way as anyone else would – to share personal news, information and holiday snaps with people they already know. Other councillors use their Facebook accounts more openly, 'friending' (that is, by allowing them to view their accounts, sharing information with) people they don't know personally. Facebook now allows politicians to create 'pages' which is a way of keeping personal use and professional use separate. A 'page' is similar to a regular Facebook account in style, but it is open for anyone registered on Facebook to see. On a page you can provide a political profile and can share information with supporters without disclosing personal networks or worrying that the wrong people will see the 'funny' pictures of you as a child that your friends are showing each other.

C. Listening

Perhaps the most valuable use of social media is using it to listen (and perhaps engage) with conversations that are already happening. Your area, your council and maybe even you yourself are being talked about online, but do you know when and how that's happening?

Most interactive websites have something called RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. This is a way that websites can automatically 'push out' new material as soon as it's published. This means you don't have to actually go a website to find out if there is new information on there; instead, the websites tell you with RSS. Free tools called feed readers (Google Reader and Bloglines are examples) can help you collect and subscribe to feeds in a single accessible place. Most mainstream media outlets have RSS feeds. Blogs and social networking sites almost always have them, too. You can even generate an RSS feed from an internet search. Leicester City Council has RSS feeds for its website [RSS: http://news.leicester.gov.uk/latestnews.aspx](http://news.leicester.gov.uk/latestnews.aspx)

Google also allows you to set up something called an 'alert'. Instead of you having to type a specific word or phrase into Google each day to check if anything new has been written about it, the website sends you an email detailing all the new instances of that word online. Alerts can provide daily or instant news about local issues straight to your email inbox. You can set up alerts for the name of your council, your ward, hot local issues or even your own name.

D. Collaborative working

Wikipedia is the most famous example of people coming together to create a document or information resource. It is built with a tool called a wiki, which means anyone on the internet can go onto the site and add to or edit the content.

Getting Started

1. Choose your name well

Your name is your political brand, so make sure that your blog name and usernames for networks like Twitter clearly identify you as you. This is particularly important if your real name has already been taken by someone else. Although you will certainly want to identify yourself as a councillor, you may or may not want to use the councillor identity as part of your website address or ID (www.cllrsmith.com for example). Keep in mind that you may not win the next election or may not stay with your current party, but still want to remain in local politics and use your online presence. It's much easier to change a few headers on your blog than to change a URL address such as www.democratpat.com. It's slightly easier to change your Twitter ID.

2. Make your blog search engine-friendly

Most people will be interested in you because of the place you represent. Make sure that your ward, your council and commonly used neighbourhood names are included in any 'about' sections and are frequently mentioned in individual blog posts where relevant. Location, location, location.

3. Content is king

If you're covering local issues well, you may be the only online source of information that's important to local people but not listed in the local newspaper. Local people searching for information about schools, libraries or parking will come to your blog.

4. Get linking

If there are other political bloggers, particularly in your area, start linking to them. Ask members of your own party to link to you. The more linked you are by websites with lots of sites linking to them, the more you'll be found in internet searches.

5. Cross-link

Make sure that all your relevant social media accounts link up. Does your Twitter address link to your blog and vice versa? If you have a Facebook political page, you can set it up to be automatically updated from your blog. Is your website address in your email signature? Leicester City Council's policy on cross-linking from the Council's webpages is set-out at the bottom of page 2 (above)

6. Be reciprocal

The blogosphere (a term to describe the online culture of bloggers) is built as much on reading and commenting as it is on writing and publishing. Good bloggers will leave comments on others' posts and most blogs will allow you to leave a link to your website in

the comments section. Some local discussion forums have this functionality, too. But be careful. You can link to your blog in all kinds of online spaces, but make sure that it's relevant to the discussion at hand. If you've written about a specific issue being discussed, link directly to that post. If you just randomly drop links, it looks desperate.

7. Leave a paper trail

Make sure your political leaflets, cards and so on have your web address or social network details.

8. Be a champion for your local area

Nobody is ever too busy to read good things about themselves or their projects. When you post a good news story, email the people involved to let them know. They will likely pass it on to other people too.

9. Be a good host

A good blog can provide a platform for further discussion. A good host will encourage comments, and these are a key driver for repeat visits. That usually means culling comments which are offensive (the racist, sexist, and homophobic ones or those that attack private individuals, for example) but allowing a healthy and vigorous debate, including disagreement with you.

10. Be realistic

If your blog concentrates on local issues, it is going to be of interest only to a relatively small group of people. But those are often precisely the individuals who are likely to make a difference in your area. Quite 'low' numbers can actually mean a huge reach in a small area.