



# **Social Media Guidance for Councillors**

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# Introduction

Social media has changed the way communicate. Channels such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs are an easy and fast way to converse and find out what our communities care about. The way that online information is created and owned, and the speed at which it is shared has changed.

The important thing to remember about social media is that it is social; it's about communication. Social media is designed to be shared meaning that it is very easy for people to forward, link to or republish comments with a potentially very wide audience. It has put the transformative power of the printed press into the hands of the people. Now anyone can publish and share their views and engage in conversation with others about those views.

Taking part in social media is now, and will continue to be a major activity in our communities. Local government needs to be involved in order to fulfil its leadership role, understand its communities and remain relevant to its stakeholders. Residents and service users are increasingly expecting a greater say in how things happen in their neighbourhood and are already discussing these issues online via social media. Engaging with these conversations can help to shape policy, support local democracy and improve our relationships and services with the customer at the heart of our decisions.

This guidance is for Councillors who would like to use social media as a tool to share information, open new dialogues with the people in their community and beyond and engage their electorate in productive two-way conversation.

# What is social media?

Social media is a blanket term applied to a range of online multimedia tools that are used for creating content and two-way communication. They can be accessed via your smartphone, PC, laptop, tablet or smart TV. All social media accounts are free of charge and can be set up quickly and easily from an Internet page. Although this guide will focus on Facebook and Twitter, some useful examples of social media include:

**Blogs** which are like an online diary journal where you can share information. Examples are Wordpress, Blogger, SimpleSite.

## **Top tip:**

Share your thoughts and activities, and comment on the issues that mean the most to you. Encourage feedback and create dialogue to help your blog evolve.

**Micro blogs** allow users to share shorter pieces of information. **Twitter** is an example of a micro-blog. Short messages which you post on Twitter are called “Tweets” – they are each limited to 140 characters (letters, numbers and spaces). Tweets are not a private means of communication and can be seen by anyone who is “following” you. Twitter also has a message facility where you can send messages directly to other Twitter users. However, all such personally directed messages can also be viewed by all of your other followers. You can even forward other Twitter users’ Tweets to your own followers, by using the Re-Tweet function. Tweeting is a good way of promoting local events, live tweeting and to give links to other online content.

## **Top tip:**

Follow and be followed. Twitter is a great tool for finding out what is happening, what people think of local and global issues. Listen first and then simply join in the conversation.

**Social Networks** such as **Facebook** are like having your own small website which can include pictures and text and can provide information and photos. Typically these sites allow you to update people on what you are doing or thinking through a ‘status’ update and allow you to talk about who you are, what’s important to you, what you have done and your plans. You can invite people to be your ‘friends’ and also set different levels of access to your account, so some people can see all the information about you or you can make less detail available to others. You can also use Facebook to communicate with groups or individuals. People who find your page, comments or proposals of interest can “like” you, which encourages further use, and is a useful way of taking a straw poll of your ideas.

**Linked-IN** is a professional equivalent of Facebook. You can provide information about your career history and skills, and people with whom you are “linked” can endorse you for particular skills. This is a handy site for finding expertise and keeping up-to-date with business developments in your ward or area.

**Flickr, Vimeo, Instagram** and **YouTube** are examples of platforms for sharing videos and photographs. Don't forget to seek permission before taking photos to upload to, or copying images from these sites. **Snapchat** is a photo messaging application for photo, video, drawing and text.

**Communities of Practice** are a way of like minded people joining a community where they can share knowledge and discuss issues relevant to the Community for example the LGA Knowledge Hub.

## So what are the benefits to councillors of using social media?

- Social media will allow you to open new conversations with the people you represent.
- Increasing numbers of people are using Twitter and Facebook, as their preferred method of communication. If you have a presence on these platforms you have the potential to establish two- way communication with all of them.
- It's a useful way of finding out what people are talking about locally, their concerns and interests.
- It's useful for finding out about breaking news, the latest research or publication or the latest policy announcements from political parties.
- It's a good way of making the electorate more aware of the work you do personally.
- Social media allows you to have a conversation with a range of people that you would never be able to physically meet and 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. “Going Viral” is not necessarily a bad thing, and refers to a mass spreading of a piece of information, potentially around the world.
- Social media is mobile. You can take it around your community, on the train, to an event or meeting.
- You can upload pictures and videos, showing for example your role in local events, area regeneration projects or images of Thanet - a picture tells a thousand words.
- It's free, accounts cost nothing and you probably already have the equipment you need. All you need is time.

- You can receive immediate feedback on your ideas and manifesto to allow you to modify your proposals in line with local thinking.
- Above all, it can be a lot of fun!

## How to use Social Media effectively

Choose your medium and sign up. This is very straightforward and will take you less than five minutes.

Facebook and Twitter are good places to start. You might want to begin with a trial personal account (rather than calling yourself “Councillor Jones”) and experiment with family and friends. Make sure that you understand how people find you and who can access your material.

Remember:

- On Facebook you can control who has access to different parts of your account. You can manage what the world sees and what your “friends” see.
- On Twitter the whole world can see everything you Tweet. Even the messages that you Tweet directly to other people can be viewed by anyone unless you have locked down your account to followers.
- When you are ready to set up your final account, consider the identity you use. The name you give yourself online is important as it allows people to find you. Prefacing your Twitter account with ‘Cllr’ lets people know exactly who you are and indicates that the **Code of Conduct** will apply.
- You might want to consider setting up a separate personal and “professional” account - you can talk about the amazing food in the restaurant around the corner to your friends and followers in your informal account, and the plans for a new development to your friends and followers on your professional account. However, many councillors think that some of their personal comments about food, places they’ve visited, football matches or TV helps break down perceptions of councillors and proves that they are just like everyone else.
- Make it easy for people to find you online. Many people will start their search for the area that you represent, so make sure you mention your location frequently as this will then be picked up by search engines. You will also want to make sure that your social media account details are on your business cards, posters and flyers.
- On Twitter, sign up to Tweety Hall and other sites where councillors can be found by their electorate.
- Increase your web presence by linking to other people and sites, leave comments on others’ posts and encourage others to link with you. The more you are mentioned, the more people will find you.
- Choose your friends on Facebook and who you would like to follow on Twitter carefully. Bear in mind that people know who follows them and will often follow you in

return.

- Find people on Twitter with links to your community, county or region by searching using the 'hashtag'(#) symbol to prefix your search term for example #Ramsgate, #Margate, #Broadstairs, #Thanet
- Be disciplined about making time available to write new content and answer your "friends" and "followers"; a regular time each week to update your Facebook status and throughout the day to check Twitter.
- Decide on what you are going to talk about and how. This could be:
  - Weekly updates of your own activities as a councillor - don't forget your pictures! This works better on Facebook as you can include more detail. Remember a Twitter 'Tweet' is only 140 characters and tends to be more instant and timely.
  - Regular updates on council policies and actions of interest to your community.
  - Links and re-tweets of other relevant national activities.
  - Issues on which you would like feedback from the community.
  - Notice of events and public meetings.

**Remember** using social media is all about two-way communication, it's good for providing information to your community, but it's better as a tool to get useful feedback. You **will** get feedback and you should expect some people to challenge your ideas or enter into a debate with you online. This is part and parcel of social media.

## Etiquette and style

- Keep your communications clear, positive, polite and professional. Plain language helps.
- Many people use abbreviations on Twitter – you'll pick these up as you go along.
- Avoid being ironic or sarcastic, it can be misinterpreted.
- On Facebook, you will need to monitor and, if necessary, censor the contributions that other people make to your site; delete them if they do not match your required standards of behaviour or language. **Defamatory and offensive language will be attributed to the publisher as well as the original author and could incur financial liability.**
- It is up to you to decide if you want to remove posts that disagree with your political position, however if you do remove them you may be accused or censoring contributions on political grounds.
- On Twitter, you can block people who are habitually offensive or vexatious. Remember however, blocking them only stops them engaging directly with you, their tweets will continue to be public to all of their followers.

- Bear in mind that constituents may find party political point scoring tedious and prefer to hear information about what you are achieving.
- If you don't have anything to say...don't say anything. Even though it's tempting to let your followers know how busy you are they will soon become bored with constant updates on your day without some relevant or interesting information.

## Support from the Council

You do not need the council to set you up with a personal social media account but you should take advantage of any training or guidance provided to help you use it properly.

It's worth remembering that the council is responsible for any information provided on its website and is subject to legal responsibilities. **You** are personally responsible for the material that you broadcast via your own social media accounts or websites.

Advice will be available to you from a number of council officers. The Monitoring Officer, Democratic Services Manager and the Communications Team can offer useful advice.

## Social Media and council meetings

Recently, there has been an increase in interest in the use of Twitter in council meetings. Other than what your constitution or social media policy says, there is no legal reason why you shouldn't use social media from meetings. However, some common sense does need to apply.

- Tweeting on meeting progress and receiving comments from the community can be helpful for transparency and engagement BUT excessive use of Twitter may give people the impression that you are not concentrating on the business in hand or are even relying on guidance from outside the meeting. For that reason, it is probably sensible not to use Twitter during a planning or licensing debate. Committee chairs may want to decide how to address this in their meetings and you should abide by the rules set out in the constitution.
- Remember, you may not need to tweet about the detail of a meeting –TDC's Full Council meetings are filmed and published on YouTube and the communications team have an "official" twitter feed during the meeting.
- Remember that you should not tweet or communicate in any way the content of exempt or confidential business dealt with in closed session such as when making formal appointments.

## Golden rules



Think before you tweet or post on Facebook. Do not say anything, post views or opinions that you would not be prepared to:

- **Discuss face to face with the person you are speaking about.**
- **Write on a placard and carry down your high street and discuss and defend with anyone who sees it.**
- **Be prepared to have minuted in a public meeting – remember Twitter or Facebook effectively publicly minutes everything for you as you go along.**

Remember that once you have said something it may be seen by millions - friends, supporters, political opponents and the press and could be re-tweeted around the world in minutes.

Keep your messages professional, polite and positive.

Remember to try to keep tweets and texts separate – many people tweet comments that they would previously have texted someone privately; this may be about meeting up later through to 'in' jokes that could be misinterpreted.

Don't follow an individual unless you know them or have a good reason for doing so. Some people, such as constituents or council employees, might find it uncomfortable to have their local councillor hanging on their every word.

If you make a mistake - admit it. Mistakes happen so don't try to cover it up as there will always be a record of what you've said.

Don't enter into unhelpful online arguments; remember all of your followers or friends will be witnessing this online. Ignore people or block them if they persist in vexatious comments.

Don't tweet or post on Facebook when you are tired. It's probably sensible to turn off your phone at any time when you think your judgement may be impaired.

Bear in mind that it is possible for your followers and friends to be seen. If you follow or are Facebook "friends" with council employees, contractors who have been procured to provide services to the council, a company or member of the public making a planning application or pressure groups, this might be construed as having a close personal association with them and therefore a personal interest.

As with your own leaflets or newsletters, always ask permission before taking a picture that you intend to use. NEVER take photos of children without the express permission of their parents based on an understanding of what you intend to use the picture for.

Do not allow anyone else access to your social media accounts, protect your passwords, especially if you use a public computer.

Just like email, you can get spam in social media. Be wary about direct messages via Twitter, even from people you know, with messages such as 'Hi, have you seen this photo of you on Twitter?' Delete these before opening, as the spam could then be sent to all of the people you are following.

# The Law

Councillors new to social media tend to be concerned about the legal implications. It is an important consideration, and some councillors and other politicians have fallen foul of the law, but with careful use and following some ground-rules you will be fine.

The style of communication employed in the social media environment tends to be fast and informal. Messages can appear lightweight and transitory.

Whenever you post something on social media, it becomes a publication, you have effectively made a broadcast. As it is now in the public domain, it is subject to both the **Code of Conduct** and to various **Laws**.

## Code of Conduct

If you conduct yourself on Twitter or Facebook as you would in person on the street then you will be fine.

Remember that according to guidance from the Ombudsman, the Code of Conduct applies to you whenever you are “Conducting the business of your authority, acting, claiming to act or give the impression you are acting in your official capacity as a member or representative of your authority” Also the Code applies if you “Conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or your authority into disrepute” If you can be identified as a councillor when you are using social media, either by your account name or how you describe yourself or by what you comment upon and how you comment, the requirements of the Code of Conduct apply. Also if you say something that could be regarded as bringing your office or authority into disrepute the Code applies even if you are not apparently acting in your official capacity or do not identify yourself as a member.

Remember that the Ombudsman’s guidance states that “Making unfair or inaccurate criticism of your authority in a public arena might well be regarded as bringing your authority into disrepute”

In the same way that you are required to act in council meetings or in communities you should:

- **Show respect for others** - do not use social media to be rude or disrespectful.
- **Not disclose confidential information about people or the council.**
- **Not bully or intimidate others** - repeated negative comments about or to individuals could be interpreted as bullying or intimidation.
- **Not try to secure a benefit for yourself or a disadvantage for others.**
- **Abide by the laws of equality** – do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or anti faith. Even as a joke or “tongue in cheek”

## Predetermination

As a councillor, you are aware that when you act in a quasi-judicial capacity, for example on a planning or licensing committee, you should not make up your mind about an issue that is to be formally decided upon before you have heard all the relevant information. You are allowed to be predisposed to a particular view but not to have gone so far as to have predetermined your position. It is important to remember therefore that anything relevant you might have said about particular issues on social media could be used as evidence of your having made up your mind in advance of hearing all the relevant information.

## **Criminal Offences**

These generally apply to you already in your conduct as a councillor, but it is worth considering them as they apply to social media:

**Harassment** - It is a criminal offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against someone where this is likely to cause alarm, harassment nuisance or distress.

**Data Protection** - It is illegal to publish personal data about individuals unless they have given you their permission. As a councillor you are a data controller in your own right and therefore personally responsible for what you publish.

**Incitement** - It is a criminal offence to incite any criminal act.

**Discrimination and Racially Aggravated Offences (or any other protected Characteristic)** - It is a criminal offence to make a discriminatory remark about anyone based on a "Protected Characteristic" as defined in The Equality Act ( such as their race, religion, sexual orientation etc).

**Malicious & Obscene Communications** - It is a criminal offence to send malicious or obscene communications.

## **Civil Law**

**Defamation** - It is against the law to make a false statement about someone which damages their personal or professional reputation. Crucially - even if you simply retweet or pass on information originally posted by others, you may still be held equally as responsible as the original commentator. This can also apply to publishing images. If you're found liable to another person, you could be ordered to pay large sums of money as damages.

### **Recent high profile example of defamation via social media:**

"High Court: Sally Bercow's Lord McAlpine tweet was libel"

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-22652083>

**Copyright** - The legal ownership of the contents of documents, photos, videos and music belong to the person who created them. You could be in breach of copyright if you reproduce

such material without the owner's permission. Always ask for written consent before you use someone else's material.

**Political Comment and Electioneering** - Remember that although it is acceptable to make political points or canvass votes via your own social media accounts this will not be permissible if you are using this via council supplied computer equipment, certainly in the run-up to elections. The Electoral Commission has further information about the return on expenditure that candidates need to provide on advertising or campaign literature.

## Further Information, Interesting Sites and Sources of Help

Bear in mind that information, sites and terminology change quickly. Facebook is already reporting a drop in users.

Here are some current examples of information and useful sites but bear in mind that they may be quickly out of date.

Sign on to **Twitter** here

<https://twitter.com/>

Twitter Guide - -How To, Tips and Instructions

<http://mashable.com/guidebook/twitter/>

Sign up to **Facebook** here

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/>

Facebook Guide – How To, Tips and Instructions

<http://mashable.com/guidebook/facebook/>

### **Tweety Hall.**

A platform that gathers all the Councillors that have Twitter accounts in the UK together so that all their posts can be read in one place and the public can easily find their local councillor. All you have to do to join them is send them a Tweet.

<http://tweetyhall.co.uk/>

### **Twenty-first century councillors**

<http://socialmedia.21st.cc/>

Useful guidance for members using social media.

**LGA's Knowledge Hub** is an example of a community of practice. This one was set up specifically for people working in and with local government and has online forums, libraries full of materials and details of events. <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/>

### **Social Media and Online Collaboration Community.**

Join this Community of the KnowledgeHub to talk to other councillors and officers working with Social Media.

## **Glossary**

### **Blog**

Term derived from Weblog i.e an internetlog or diary

### **Blogosphere**

All the Blogs on the Internet

### **Community of Practice**

Group of people who are members of an online 'club' because they have a role or an interest in an area of work

### **Direct Message**

A message sent via Twitter to someone who follows you or who you follow.

### **Facebook**

An example of social networking

### **Flickr**

Photo sharing site

### **Follower**

Someone who has chosen to follow you on Twitter

### **Friend**

Someone you have allowed to access your Facebook page.

### **Forum**

A virtual discussion area

### **#Hashtag**

A hashtag or # is a way of denoting a keyword which can be used as a search term on Twitter.

### **Instagram**

A platform for sharing photos and videos

### **Instant Messaging**

A conversation with one other person via for example Microsoft Live Messenger or Yahoo Messenger. A conversation which, if you indicate that you are available for a chat is more immediate than e mail and easier to type than a text

### **Microblog**

Short blog e.g. Twitter using a maximum of 140 characters

### **Pintrest**

A virtual pinboard for creating and sharing images

### **RebelMouse**

A free service that connects to your accounts at services such as Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram. It integrates all your SM Tweets, postings and blogs automatically into one page, boosting your SM presence without you doing anything extra as it 'runs in the background'. It will save you having to tweet your blogs etc. to get more prominence on search engines.

**Retweet**

To forward a Tweet received on Twitter

**RSS feeds or Really Simple Syndication feeds**

Messages from websites informing you that new information is available so that you don't have to keep checking the website for updates

**Social Bookmarking**

A way of saving and sharing all your favourite sites on the web, for example, **Delicious**

**Social networking**

Facebook etc

**Snapchat**

A photo messaging application for photos, videos, drawings and text

**Spam**

Electronic junk mail

**Trending**

Current popular people or conversations as in trending on Twitter now...

**Troll**

Someone who disrupts online communities or discussions through unhelpful, malicious or irrelevant posts

**Tweet**

A message sent on Twitter

**Tweety Hall**

A virtual gathering place for councillors with Twitter accounts

**Twitter**

An example of microblogging

**Vimeo**

A platform for sharing videos and photographs

**Wiki**

A tool which enables anyone to add or edit content on a website

**Wikipedia**

Online Encyclopaedia which works using this method and is therefore not always accurate

**You Tube**

A platform for sharing videos and photographs

Credits: WLGA 2013