

**Social Media**

**A Guide for Members**

**First Draft**

# Contact

## Welsh Local Government Association

The WLGA's primary purposes are to promote a better local government, its reputation and to support authorities in the development of policies and priorities which will improve public service and democracy.

It represents the 22 local authorities in Wales with the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities as associate members.

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## Introduction

Social media is changing the world.

It is changing the way we communicate, the way we receive our news and, increasingly, the way we think about ourselves and others. Social media is transforming politics too; it makes politicians and public institutions more accessible, allows individuals to have their voices heard and helps share ideas or promote campaigns, potentially to millions, in an instant.

It is a powerful tool that can do much good but, in the wrong hands, can cause harm too – the growth of online abuse or trolling is a concern, as is the mounting evidence that organisations or even foreign agencies can exploit social media or use 'fake news' to influence public opinion or even affect democratic contests<sup>1</sup>.

Social media's influence is growing, not only are the number of active users increasing but it is also being used more effectively as a medium to communicate, engage and mobilise.

Social media has therefore become a vital tool for councils and councillors to inform and engage with the communities they serve.

Many councillors already use social media and many more are thinking about using it. As a councillor, there are additional things to consider when using social media, including the code of conduct and managing expectations and workload.

This guidance offers advice for those councillors who are new to social media and some tips for those already using it. Social media is rapidly evolving, so this guidance offers a general overview, some key pointers and principles and references to step-by-step resources online.

## 1. What is social media?

Social media is vast blanket term applied to a range of online multimedia tools; in short, social media allows you to communicate, broadcast or publish to millions in an instant, usually for free and all from a small device in the palm of your hand.

Social media can be set up and accessed via your smartphone, PC, laptop, tablet or smart TV. Social media applications (apps) or platforms allow you to communicate (either with individuals, specific groups or everyone), share information, share photos, create, edit and share audio or videos and play games with others.

Councils now use social media as a matter of course to communicate and consult with their residents who now expect this to be another communication channel, especially for urgent information. Council Twitter feeds includes information on community events, school and

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39830727> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41355903>

road closures, job vacancies, sporting events and consultations, as well as details and, occasionally, detailed accounts of council meetings, including links to webcasts. Council Scrutiny Committees may also be using social media to promote and consult on their activities and undertake service reviews, for example,

[@Mon\\_CC\\_Scrutiny](#) [@SwanseaScrutiny](#)

Although there are some risks to using social media, which will be covered later in this guide, social media can be fun and innovative and can be used as an alternative method of communication and engagement. It can also break down barriers and stereotypes. Councils and other public bodies have used it for positive public relations, for example, it is worth looking at Swansea's @lovethelagoon or #FacesOfSwanseaCouncil2018, or Cardiff's #workingforyou, Torfaen's 'In the Depot' video on [Youtube](#) or councils asking the public to name snow ploughs - we have social media to thank for Boaty McBoatface!

Social media has a massive reach and some individuals (typically celebrities or national politicians) have many millions of followers. Social media is growing in usage too, an ONS survey in 2017<sup>2</sup> showed that 66% of people in the UK had used social media in the last 3 months. It's not just younger people who use social media, research by the Office of National statistics showed that there is significant use across all age groups:

Percentage of individuals who had used social media in past 6 months (ONS 2017)

Age	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	All
%	96	88	83	68	51	27	66

According to Ofcom<sup>3</sup>, in 2017, 74% of adults used a smartphone, 84% of Welsh households had access to the internet. Internet users in Wales spent an average of 21 hours online per week in 2016.

Facebook and Twitter are the most widely used social media platforms and therefore the most relevant to councillors; it is estimated that there are 17.1 million Twitter users in the UK<sup>4</sup> whilst Facebook suggests that there are 30 million UK users per day on mobiles alone<sup>5</sup> and globally over 2.20 billion monthly active Facebook users!

This guide will therefore focus on Facebook and Twitter for councillors, and will touch on others too.

## Blogs

A blog (an abbreviation of "web-log") is essentially an online journal with your latest posts appearing first. It can be a journal of diary entries, thoughts or ideas or somewhere to publish fuller articles on issues. Anyone can add comments to your blog and you can use

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<sup>2</sup>

(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/adhocs/007401socialnetworkingbyagegroup2011to2017>)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/104985/cmr-2017-wales.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/104985/cmr-2017-wales.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271350/twitter-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

<sup>5</sup>

the site to link or draw attention to other online comments or sources of information. Blogs are most effective when they are regularly maintained and updated.

**KEEP AT IT...**As with all social media, if you start blogging, it's best to keep it up and keep it up-to-date; all it takes is for someone to find your last blog entry of some years ago and they can criticise you by saying 'you have nothing else to say' or 'you have no new ideas'. If you do stop blogging think about archiving the material or moving it over to a new social media platform.

Blogs tend to be included as part of an existing website or via Facebook, which means it's easier to promote and encourage broader feedback.

Some leaders produce blogs via their council websites, for example in [Caerphilly](#) and [Rhondda Cynon Taf](#), whilst other councillors publish their own, for example [here](#).



**Twitter** is technically a micro-blog. Twitter allows you to post information, news, photos or videos in messages that are known as **tweets**. Twitter enables you to **follow** people, organisations, news or information that you are interested in and post information and messages of your own. People or organisations in turn can follow you, so they can see all of your tweets; you can even adjust the settings to allow you to be alerted when someone you're particularly interested in tweets.

Tweets are each limited to 280 characters long (characters include letters, numbers, punctuation and spaces). Tweets are not a private means of communication and can be seen by anyone who is following you.

For example,



You can **like** or **retweet** information and someone else's tweets that you would like to pass on to others. For example,



Conversations on the same theme on Twitter are called **threads**. You can search for Tweets on a subject that you are interested in by typing your subject into the search box.

Tweets on the same theme are drawn together using **hashtags**. People use the hashtag symbol (#) before a relevant keyword or phrase in their Tweet to categorise those Tweets and help them show more easily in a Twitter search. Clicking on a hash tagged word in any message shows you other Tweets that include that hashtag.

You can have a private conversation or create a group conversation with anyone who follows you by using the **Direct Message** option. Anyone you do not follow can also send you a Direct Message if you have opted to receive Direct Messages from anyone or you have previously sent that person a Direct Message.

You can **block** or **mute** accounts on Twitter. Once an account has been blocked, those accounts cannot follow you and you cannot follow them. However even those you have blocked can still access your account through a third party who follows you.

Here are some examples of councillors' Twitter accounts.

[@CraigDrosPlaid](https://twitter.com/CraigDrosPlaid)  
[@LeaderNewport](https://twitter.com/LeaderNewport)  
[twitter.com/mndsc06](https://twitter.com/mndsc06)  
[@PeterFox61](https://twitter.com/PeterFox61)  
[@EllenapGwynn](https://twitter.com/EllenapGwynn)

And some useful organisations

[@WelshLGA](https://twitter.com/WelshLGA)  
[@LGACOMMS](https://twitter.com/LGACOMMS)  
[@WelshGovernment](https://twitter.com/WelshGovernment)  
[WG\\_localgov@AssemblyWales](mailto:WG_localgov@AssemblyWales)  
[@BBCWalesNews](https://twitter.com/BBCWalesNews)

### Warning

As a politician, others may consider your tweets 'fair game'. A good rule of thumb is not to commit anything to social media that could at some point be used against you. Even your retweets can be perceived as something you endorse or support.

As with emails, although Direct Messages are private and you may trust the recipients, they can become public if leaked!

All the details about how twitter works and how you can set up an account can be found here. <https://help.twitter.com/en/create-twitter-account>



**Facebook** is the most extensively used social network in the world. Essentially, it allows you to easily create your own webpage or an interactive newsletter about you, your life, your interests and friends.

Have a look at these councillors' pages

<https://www.facebook.com/cllrneilprior/>

[www.facebook.com/dhanisha4ogmore/](https://www.facebook.com/dhanisha4ogmore/)

<https://www.facebook.com/CllrSDavies>

<https://denbighshirecouncilchairman.wordpress.com/>

and these council pages

[www.facebook.com/wrexhamcouncil/](https://www.facebook.com/wrexhamcouncil/)

[www.facebook.com/IOACC/](https://www.facebook.com/IOACC/)

To use Facebook, you'll need to create a profile - a **Timeline** where you might add a photo, describe yourself, what you do and your interests. You can also describe your **Status** which would update your friends about how you are feeling or what you are doing at any given time. You can update this as often as you like.

On Facebook, you can invite people to be your **Friends** and 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 or your latest post, which encourages further use, and is a useful way of taking a straw poll of your ideas. People can also add a **Comment** on your post or **Share** your post on their own timelines.

You may wish to set up a Facebook page about your community, to promote events, announcements or your council activities; many councils and councillors do this and it can be a very effective method to engage and seek views from the community. You should be prepared to receive challenge and criticism however, as it is an open forum and not everyone will agree with your ideas or views; you can however set rules, moderate and edit other people's posts however if their language or content is offensive or inappropriate.

You can send private notes to any "friend" you're connected with on Facebook; they can only be seen by the person to whom they're sent; Facebook's **Messenger** app is increasingly popular. You can also '**Live Chat**' on Facebook. This is a real-time conversation with any of your Facebook friends who happen to be online and signed in at the same time as you are.

Crucially, Facebook lets each user control who can see their personal information and what they post on the network. You can set the level of privacy for different categories of your information and posts and the permission extended to different people who view your site. As a member you might want to differentiate between what you show your close friends and family and members of the public.

Find out more and join Facebook here

[www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)



**WhatsApp** is a free messaging app which also allows you to have traditional 'phone conversations'. It is very popular as it allows you to set up groups of friends or colleagues to keep them updated on a particular theme. It may be a quick and easy way, for example, of keeping your political group up to date on key issues. You can download the app from various app stores or visit [www.whatsapp.com](http://www.whatsapp.com)



**YouTube** is a video sharing platform. Videos are easy to record via a smartphone and are more easily distributed via Twitter or Facebook, however, some people prefer to use YouTube and it is increasingly being used by councils to post information. An example from

Pembrokeshire <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAeI9sXMHHo>

Cardiff <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4i7JfAMEnCE>

Monmouthshire - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_mWif8jCMY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_mWif8jCMY)

Conwy - <https://www.youtube.com/user/ConwyWeb>

Cardiff <https://www.youtube.com/user/cardiffcouncil/featured>

Gwynedd <https://www.youtube.com/user/CyngorGwynedd>

Powys [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCop\\_U-YVW7OB0jRIIt3b8f1Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCop_U-YVW7OB0jRIIt3b8f1Q)



## 2. Why Should You Use Social Media?

Social media will allow you to open new conversations with the people you 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.

- Don't ignore social media – it's there and won't go away! People are already online and it's growing, and people increasingly expect their councillors to be contactable via social media. If you're not involved people may bypass you or may even 'talk about you' and you're missing out on a useful source of intelligence.
- 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.
- It can help make you appear more human and down-to-earth! People often don't understand what councillors do and may have negative perceptions, but social media can give people a taste of your personal life and remind people that you are just like them, with similar interests – you do need to consider balance though and how much of your personal life you want in the public domain.
- It's an effective way of coordinating campaigns for example, mobilising support and interest and gathering followers, you can also allow campaign workers access to your Facebook account to post on your or your campaign's behalf to share the workload.
- 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 around the world – but be careful, only share information you are confident is correct, Fake News is damaging and there is the risk of defamation if you spread falsehoods.
- The local and sometimes national press will follow councillors on Twitter or Facebook. It's an instant 'press release' machine! Social media is a growing source for stories for news outlets as each tweet or comment is effectively a mini-press release. Journalists will know what you are talking about the minute you talk about it.
- Social media is mobile. You can take it around your community, on the train, to a coffee shop. You can upload pictures and videos, showing for example your role in local events, pictures of potential sites for development, new buildings, local eyesores - a picture tells a thousand words.
- It's free 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!

## What are the drawbacks?

- Having a social media presence means that people can contact you 24/7. This is great in terms of accessibility, but means that they may expect you to reply immediately. Technology and social media has raised expectations, people often expect a speedy response and resolution to their query; this expectation, coupled with the fact that social media shows how responsive you are, can create more pressure.
- Using social media can become addictive, many people find themselves answering messages late into the night because they just can't put it down.
- Similarly, too much weight can be given to what goes on in the 'Twittersphere'; sections of twitter are often described as 'echo chambers' – it may only be a couple of people with a limited number of followers with strong views on a subject who are 'bouncing' off each other – they may be in the minority and not be representative; take a step back, the rest of the community or the rest of society may be blissfully unaware or may not think in the same way!
- People can post false information, insults or messages that you would not want to be associated with on your social media platforms. These can be spread rapidly via social media.
- Some people say things via social media that they say to your face, it's an easy way of taking personal pot shots at councillors. People making these comments are often called Trolls and may not be interested in facts, just in attacking you.
- Councillors, and in particular women councillors, are increasingly the subject of online abuse, bullying and harassment on social media. The WLGA has produced a [separate guide](#) on how to deal with online abuse.

**It's easier said than done,  
but try not to get too  
concerned about what's said  
online...**

You are likely to receive criticism at some point and trolls may try to rile you, but often they will have few followers and their comments may not be seen by many people. Keep calm and the best advice is to ignore, often trolls will crawl back under their bridge...if it does get serious, you can report it.

## Are you controlling your social media use or is it controlling you?

Recent research has recognised that some people feel out of control in their use of social media<sup>6</sup>.

Ask yourself how comfortable you feel if you cannot access your social media accounts? It is important for councillors to bear in mind that even if the rest of the world seems to be online 24/7, you don't have to be. Being a councillor is a professional role and you can decide how available you want to make yourself. There are some common recommendations for managing your time in front of a screen and you may want to consider some of these:

- Establish a routine, check your messages at the same time every day rather than responding to the 'ping' of every new message arriving
- Looking at a screen can disrupt your sleep patterns, consider turning off all screens two hours before going to bed and make the bedroom a screen free zone
- When you are with your residents face to face, give them your undivided attention to help you focus on what's happening where you are and not appear rude.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180118-how-much-is-too-much-time-on-social-media>

### 3. Getting Started

Choose your medium and sign up. Signing up is very straightforward and will take you less than five minutes! Facebook and Twitter are good places to start.

If you don't already have an account, ask a colleague, friend or family member for advice, ask them to show you how they use social media. 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. You can '**Protect my Tweets**', which essentially makes your tweets private to only your current followers, but that defeats the object of using Twitter to engage more widely.

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.

#### **Consider:**

- Different councillors have different views, but you might want to consider setting up a separate personal and "councillor" account, at least at first - 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 the new bypass to your friends and followers on your councillor account. Separate accounts can help you manage some of the online trolling that is likely to come your way as a councillor – it can be a way of keeping your home life and councillor life separate. 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 normal 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 that 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.
- Increase your social media following by following other people, retweeting other people's tweets, liking tweets or posts or commenting on people's Facebook posts Find people on Twitter with links to your community, county or region or with similar interests by searching using the 'hashtag' (#) symbol to prefix your search term for example #llandrindod, #powys #midwales

- Be disciplined about making time available to write new content and answer your “friends” and “followers” at a regular time each week to update your Facebook status and throughout the day to check Twitter. If you use your mobile phone, you can set notifications to alert you each time you are mentioned in a tweet.
- If you do not want to be available every hour of the day or night, tell people when your account will be checked, for example you might add “available 9.00-7.00 weekdays” on your profile.
- 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 Twitter is only 280 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.
  - Notice of events and public meetings.
- using social media is all about two-way communication, it’s good for providing information to your community or flagging up press statements, 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.
- 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!
- 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 could 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 of censoring contributions on political grounds.
- 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.

## Monitoring social media

It can be difficult to keep on top of what's happening online; people are posting and tweeting all the time and if you are following many people or organisations, social media can become 'noisy' and you could miss things of interest or significance.

A quick way to check up on things on Twitter is to visit the Twitter page of some of your favourite people, organisations or news outlets to see what they've been saying. You could also search for a particular theme or issue with a hashtag#.

If you're keen to find out what people are saying about you, your local area or local council for example, there are social media management applications that you can use such as [Hootsuite](#) or [Buffer](#). These are simple to set up and use and can allow you to see how often people read or retweet your tweets. It also allows you schedule tweets for example, to send a pre-prepared tweet at a certain time of day.

## The Welsh Language

You can use social media in the language of your choice; you do not have to translate your personal Tweets or Facebook accounts.

Councils' social media streams might however be available either separately in Welsh and English or bilingually. The Welsh Language Commissioner feels that there is no need for social media streams to be bilingual as the two separate streams will be accessed by, and will be sufficient for different communities.<sup>7</sup> Make sure that you are aware of your Council's rules on the use of the Welsh language set out in your Welsh Language Scheme.

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.comisiynyddygymraeg.cymru/hybu/SiteCollectionDocuments/Technoleg%2c%20Gwefannau%20a%20Meddalwedd%20-%20Technology%2c%20Websites%20and%20Software.pdf>

## 4. Staying safe and dealing with trolls

Some form of online disagreement and criticism is inevitable and, if you're not online, you or your policies may already be subject to debate without you. Disagreement and challenge is a key feature of democratic debate, however, online it can easily spill over into abuse or harassment.

You will therefore need to prepare yourself for some uncomfortable reading, which may cause some upset. You cannot prevent online abuse, but you can take control of how and whether you respond and, if it becomes serious, you can report it.

**The WLGA has produced a separate guidance on dealing with online abuse which you may find useful.** You can read it [here](#).

### Some advice

#### Take Control

Decide for yourself and make it clear on your homepage what you expect from people who are engaging with you on Social Media. You might say, for example, that whilst you welcome an open and frank exchange of views any inappropriate comments will be removed and that any comment which is libellous or threatening or becomes harassment will be reported.

#### Remember that you don't have to put up with abuse or harassment just because you are a political figure

Be prepared to 'Mute' or 'Block' or 'Unfriend' abusive users from your account or ask them to remove comments. If a comment crosses the line into abuse or harassment you can report this to Facebook or Twitter or even the police.

#### Respond or ignore?

When faced with an abusive comment give yourself some time to decide whether to respond or ignore it. Trolls often have few followers or few followers of significance – if you reply it can lead to a tit for tat argument fuelling further confrontation and provides the troll with the "oxygen of publicity" or the satisfaction of seeing you riled. Chances are you'll have far more followers than the troll, so if you reply, all of your followers will be aware of the troll's original tweet. Although ignoring the comment can lead to short term allegations of dodging an issue but may succeed in the long term.

**Don't feed the troll!**

## **Stay calm and polite**

Not every criticism is from a Troll – sometimes a frustrated member of the public may be critical or cross with you initially on social media, particularly if they are trying to resolve a council service issue. If you respond constructively, their tone will change and they may even apologise or show you appreciation online.

Bear in mind that for every Troll there will be many more legitimate and sensible followers. Think of them when you respond. One approach is to respond with facts only or to refer the troll to a longer factual statement about the situation or a set of “frequently asked questions” that you can post to pre-empt queries. You might want to invite the troll to a public meeting. They may find it harder to be abusive in public. You may also want to remind the Troll that you are more than happy to have a political debate in your role as a councillor but that personal comments about you or your family are unacceptable.

**The [Facebook](#) and [Twitter Help Pages](#) have full details about how to block users and how to report abuse**

## **A Criminal Offence?**

If someone sends threatening, abusive or offensive messages they may be committing an offence. If you receive a message which you consider falls into this category, do not respond to it and check out the guidance provided by the police and CFPS and if appropriate report it.

<https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/Q770.htm>

[http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a\\_to\\_c/communications\\_sent\\_via\\_social\\_media/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/)

**Remember, the WLGA has produced a [separate guide](#) on [Dealing with Online Abuse](#)**



## 5. Support from the Council

Councillors are generally provided with the ICT equipment that they need to do their job. The Independent Remuneration Panel expects that this will include equipment, support and training.

It is also reasonable to expect that you should also have access to social media sites via council ICT equipment to enable you to carry out your councillor role more effectively. 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.

Most councils have a social media policy. You will need to abide by this and any social media protocols that may have been agreed when using your “councillor” account.

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 – but more of this later.

Advice will be available to you from a number of council officers. The Monitoring Officer, Head of Democratic Services, the Communications Team and the ICT Manager are likely to have useful advice.

## 6. Social Media and Council Meetings

Your council's Social Media policy and/or Council Constitution will provide you with guidance about if and when you can use social media during council meetings. Other than what your constitution or social media policy says, there is no legal reason why you shouldn't use social media during 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 your constitution.
- Many politicians tweet their contributions or questions to meetings or debates to keep their followers informed of how they're representing their communities' interests. Remember, you may not need to tweet about the detail of a meeting if the meeting is being webcast. Your council may have official" twitter feeds for live on-line conversations to run alongside the meeting webcast.
- If your council webcasts your meetings, this provides a useful way of the public viewing what is happening at first hand and ensures that any video recordings are accurate. Many councils do not allow individuals to film meetings informally, whether this is done by councillors or the public, and is usually covered by the Constitution. It may provide a distraction to the proceedings and, if an edited version of events appears on You Tube it might create a false impression.
- Remember that you should not tweet or communicate in any way the content of exempt or confidential business dealt with by local authorities in closed session such as when making formal appointments.

## 8. 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 have texted to someone privately before the advent of social media; this may be about meeting up later (do you want all your followers knowing your plans and gate-crashing your lunch!?) through to 'in' jokes or banter that could be misinterpreted.
- Exercise discretion when choosing who to follow on Twitter or 'befriend' on Facebook, for example, some council employees might find it a bit uncomfortable or inappropriate to have a councillor hanging on their every word. 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.
- 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 tweet or post on Facebook when you are "tired or emotional"! It's probably sensible to turn off your phone at any time when you think your judgement may be impaired. Even if you exercise social media control, other people will still have their smart phones, so may post a photo or video of you 'enjoying yourself'; you need to let your hair down, but it's just one extra thing to consider as a councillor in the age of social media.
- As with your own leaflets or newsletters, 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

### **Warning**

Don't discuss casework on social media or encourage people to contact you about issues that might be personal to them. Encourage them to use more secure channels.

use the picture for. Your council will have a policy on taking pictures of children, take advice on this before taking or using pictures.

- Do not allow anyone else access to your social media accounts. Protect your passwords and use robust, unique passwords and change them regularly especially if you use a public or shared 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...

## 9. Keep on the right side of 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 or in your leaflets, 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" <sup>8</sup>

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. 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"

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ombudsman.wales/guidance-policies/>

In the same way that you are required to act in council meetings or in your 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 had 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.

### **DON'T BECOME A TROLL YOURSELF!**

Social media is a great tool for councillors to challenge and scrutinise, but always think about what you are saying, how you are saying it, how often and about whom. If you are perceived to be too aggressive or too confrontational or too frequent, it could begin to damage your reputation, undermine your relationship with colleagues or you could risk breaching the code of conduct in terms of bullying, intimidation or lack of respect for others.

It's therefore not appropriate for you to use social media to criticise your council's officers, who often will not be in a position to defend or respond publicly.

Many councils have apps or member referral services; it is often best to use these mechanisms to request council services or report local concerns as you are likely to receive a resolution to your request.

## Criminal Offences

Don't panic! 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 and the General Data Protection Regulation.** - It is illegal to publish personal data about individuals unless they have given you their consent. This might apply to your constituents or service users. As a councillor you are a data controller in your own right and therefore personally responsible for what you publish. Make sure you understand the requirements of the GDPR. more information about this here. *insert link to WLGA member page on GDPR*

Contact the Data Protection Officer in your council for more information.

**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

This is where things get riskier for anyone who uses Twitter or Facebook, whether they are councillors, members of the public or celebrities:

**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 found liable to another person, you could be ordered to pay large sums of money as damages.

**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.

#### **BEWARE OF FAKE NEWS!**

Social media is breeding ground for fake news or 'click bait' (where a deliberately salacious headline with a link tries to draw you in, often to a very mundane news item accompanied by lots of pop-up adverts); view all news or gossip with a discerning eye – it could be embarrassing if you retweet or promote fake news and, worse, you could be breaking the law if you circulate false statements about someone, even if you are just retweeting something someone else has posted.



## Further information, interesting sites and sources of help

Bear in mind that information, sites and terminology change quickly. the next big social media platform will soon be on its way. 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/>

Sign up to **Facebook** here

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

**Social Media Checklist for Councillors** (Local Government Association)

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/digital-communications/social-1>

**#FollowMe - A guide to social media for elected members in Scotland** (Scottish Improvement Service)

[http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/elected\\_members/follow-me-guide-to-social-media-for-elected-members.pdf](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/elected_members/follow-me-guide-to-social-media-for-elected-members.pdf)

### **Nextdoor**

Is a social network for neighbourhoods where people who live within the same or neighbouring communities can share information, organise events and take opinion polls. It's a useful platform for members to raise awareness and tap into what is interesting or concerning local residents.

[https://nextdoor.co.uk/about\\_us/](https://nextdoor.co.uk/about_us/)