

Councillors Guide to Handling Online Abuse

March 2018



Social media has become a powerful tool for councillors, helping them to engage with communities, raise awareness of community issues, events, or council initiatives and to seek views and receive feedback.

Social media however has its darker side; online abuse and bullying or 'trolling' has reached record levels and politicians, particularly women, are often the target of unacceptable, unpleasant and, sometimes, threatening online abuse.

“Abuse of public servants is unacceptable and the online abuse of councillors should not be tolerated”

The abuse of public servants is unacceptable and the online abuse of councillors should not be tolerated. Councillors are committed individuals who invest a huge amount of time, energy and emotion into serving their communities and the public. Councillors do not often receive thanks or recognition for their efforts, but they should not expect abuse and harassment.

Being a councillor can be a challenging and often vulnerable role. In the era of austerity and cuts to public service funding, the Cabinet Secretary for Local Government Alun Davies AM recently recognised that ‘...the most difficult job in politics in Wales today is that of a councillor’. Councillors often take difficult or controversial decisions, which may affect the communities in which they live; councillors are local, accessible and visible and can therefore be subjected to personal challenge, criticism or, worse, abuse.

Elected politicians in general are increasingly subject to personal abuse and threats; these issues were explored and several recommendations were made in the December 2017 Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life Review into ‘Intimidation in Public Life’.¹

In February 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May MP announced that the UK Government intends to consult on making it an offence in electoral law to intimidate candidates and campaigners². Politicians will continue to take a personal and collective stand in challenging intimidation, however until a change in law, candidates and politicians will unfortunately have to continue to seek support from colleagues in managing or reporting any abuse.

¹https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/666927/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1_2_.pdf

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-standards-in-public-life-6-february-2018>

Online abuse is an unfortunate feature of modern society and it is difficult to prevent in the age of social media. Online abuse is on the increase; the overall number of ‘malicious communications’ recorded by Welsh police forces more than doubled in 2015, to 2,915 reports of cyberbullying, trolling, online harassment and death threats³.

Concerns about online abuse of councillors are growing⁴ and several councillors who stood down at the 2017 elections did so due to general abuse from members of the public.

“Challenge and scrutiny is a key part of democratic accountability and should be welcomed; but it should remain constructive and courteous”

Challenge and scrutiny is a key part of democratic accountability and should be welcomed; but it should remain constructive and courteous. Some residents may feel frustrated about an issue or wish to raise a legitimate complaint; but it should be polite and respectfully raised.

Occasionally such instances can cross the line but can be managed as they are well-intentioned; other instances however can be malicious and vexatious.

Online abuse is sadly likely to be an inevitable downside of being a councillor, so it is important that councillors prepare themselves and consider the steps they can take to manage, minimise and respond to any incidents.

“Councillors need to be particularly careful about what they post online themselves”

Councillors need to be particularly careful about what they post online themselves. Councillors are expected to uphold the highest of standards and are subject to a statutory code of conduct. Councillors should therefore ensure that what they say and how they say things online do not cause undue distress or upset to members of the public or other councillors. The WLGA has produced a separate [Social Media Guide for Councillors](#) which outlines the “Dos and Don’ts” of social media and the legal and code of conduct risks (and protection) for councillors.

Some unsympathetically say that politicians should ‘grow a thicker skin’ and whilst it is true that councillors do have to prepare themselves for likely abuse and sometimes the best approach is to ignore it if you can, there are some approaches you can take, social media companies and, ultimately, the law are all on your side.

“Social media companies and, ultimately, the law are on your side”

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-41729206>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-41263983>

Your response to a particular online post or to a repetitive troll however requires personal judgement, circumstances will vary and each post may require a different response depending on the nature and subject matter of the message, the history of the individual and so on.

This guide provides advice on how to manage or report online abuse or harassment and points you in the direction of online resources⁵ which will guide you through the process of blocking, unfriending, muting, hiding or reporting online posts.

In summary, if you don't like a social media comment you might choose to ignore it or challenge it but if a social media comment is libellous, threatening or becomes harassment, you can take action and report it.

If you are concerned about any social media activity, you may wish to seek the advice of your Monitoring Officer in the first instance; should you wish to seek other support you may wish to approach the Head of Democratic Services or other councillors in your group or in your ward.



Tackling abuse on Twitter™

1. “No tit for tat on twitter”

No matter how tempting it might be, entering a ‘tit-for-tat’ debate with a troll is a risky approach. You are unlikely ever to have the ‘last word’ and trolls, like all bullies, seek attention and are looking for a reaction; a response may just fuel them further.

“Shall I put you down as a ‘Maybe’ then?”

Humour and sarcasm can sometimes work: one councillor who received unpleasant abuse from a troll during the local elections succeeded in silencing the troll by responding: ‘Shall I put you down as a ‘Maybe’ then?’

Sometimes it can work and it can certainly make you feel better, but it may end up encouraging a more vitriolic and prolonged response and sarcasm does not always translate well on social media, so you may confuse or offend some of your normal followers as a result.

It is also more than likely that you will have many, many more followers than the troll will. Most trolls have few followers and many of them may be sympathetic to the troll's opinions and style. If you do decide to react and reply to a troll's tweet, all your many hundreds or thousands of followers will see the troll's original tweet and you will just help spread the

⁵ Links to resources are embedded in the text but are also included in footnotes, should the reader be using a hard copy version.

troll's abuse, allegations or misinformation on his or her behalf. On balance, it is probably not worth giving the troll the oxygen of publicity.

2. Whistling in the wind?

Check to see if the troll has many followers and who those followers are. As noted above, the chances are that a troll will have few followers. If that's the case, no matter how concerning the comments made it is likely that few people (and few people you care about) will have seen them.

3. Your right of reply

If a troll has posted some inaccurate information about you or the council, you may of course wish to set 'the record straight'. You should balance up the risks and likely success of this approach and, if the information is libellous, you may wish to receive legal advice or follow up through alternative routes.

4. Move the tweet into a different domain

If the tweet is a complaint about a council service, ask for contact details and pass the information to officers to follow-up on. Inform the individual that this is the course of action you are taking. This may help defuse any tensions.

5. Take a record of the abuse

If you have received online abuse, even if you are not overly concerned or if you intend to ignore it, you should consider keeping a record should any incidents escalate in the future. You can simply 'screen shot', 'clip' or 'snip' tweets on your phone or computer. You may also decide to warn the troll that you are keeping a record of all messages and may refer them to the appropriate authorities, which may scare them off posting further comments or might encourage them to delete them.

6. Dealing with defamation

In addition to taking a record, if you believe that a tweet defames you (i.e. a false statement that could harm your reputation) there are several options you may wish to take. You may contact the individual initially to request that the tweet be deleted; some individuals may have made a mistake without malice and will remove their post immediately. Depending on the nature of the tweet and the number of followers who may have viewed the tweet, you may wish to seek a correction and/or an apology.

If this approach is unsuccessful or where a defamatory tweet causes serious concern or is part of a concerted campaign, you may wish to issue a 'notice and take-down' letter via your solicitor; although you may not have the intention of proceeding further, the threat of legal action is often a powerful deterrent and can prompt a swift and successful resolution. You may wish to seek informal advice from your Monitoring Officer, but a Monitoring Officer is unlikely to be able to become involved unless the defamer is another elected member (in which case it may be an alleged breach of the Code of Conduct).

7. Mute or Block Trolls

You may wish to unfollow, mute or even block a troll or someone who is persistently tweeting you. Guidance about to mute and block is available from Twitter, but in summary:

Muting⁶ allows you to remove an account's Tweets from your timeline but does not go as far as unfollowing or blocking the account. Muted accounts will not know that they have been muted and you can 'unmute' them at any time.

Blocking⁷ allows you to restrict specific accounts from contacting you, seeing your Tweets or following you. Unlike muting, trolls can find out that they have been 'blocked' and may accuse you of avoiding their scrutiny; this may be a small price to pay if their behaviour is checked and can be easily rebutted if necessary.

According to Twitter, blocked accounts cannot:

- Follow you
- View your Tweets (unless they report you, and your Tweets mention them)
- Find your Tweets in search when logged in on Twitter
- Send Direct Messages to you
- View your following or followers lists, likes or lists when logged in on Twitter
- View a Moment you've created when logged in on Twitter
- Add your Twitter account to their lists
- Tag you in a photo

8. Report the abuse to Twitter

Twitter itself promotes 'Rules' encouraging constructive debate but it explicitly prohibits behaviour '...that crosses the line into abuse, including behaviour that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another user's voice.'⁸

⁶ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20171399>

⁷ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/117063>

⁸ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/18311?lang=en#>

If tweets are so offensive that you believe they violate Twitter's rules, you can report them to Twitter who may decide to take action. For further information about how to report 'violations' visit Twitter's [How to report violations](#)⁹ page.

9. Report the abuse to the Police

If someone sends threatening, abusive or offensive messages via any social networking site, they could be committing an offence. The most relevant offences are 'harassment' and 'malicious communications'.

According to the Police, harassment means a 'course of conduct' (i.e. two or more related occurrences) and the messages do not necessarily have to be violent in nature, but must be oppressive and need to have caused some alarm or distress.

An offence relating to malicious communications may be a single incident, but for an offence to have been committed, a message must be indecent, grossly offensive, obscene or threatening or menacing.

The Police advise that you may wish to initially report the matter to Twitter, but if you wish to report either of these alleged offences to your local police force, you should not respond to the message as it may encourage the sender and make the situation worse. The Police also advise that you take a screen shot of the message so if it gets deleted later there will still be a record of what was said.

Further information about social media and criminal offences is available via the [Police](#)¹⁰ and [Crime Prosecution Service](#)¹¹

Tackling abuse on Facebook™

You can take a similar approach to responding to abuse and harassment as you would to Twitter or any other social media platform; you need to weigh up whether it's best to ignore, respond, refer, take legal advice or report any incidents.

That said, Facebook has slightly different '[Community Standards](#)'¹² and alternative methods of dealing with complaints.

⁹ <https://support.twitter.com/articles/15789#>

¹⁰ <https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/Q770.htm>

¹¹ http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#attacks-on-public-figures>

You are also more likely to encounter community or campaign groups or pages which facilitate scrutiny of you, fellow councillors or your local council and some have been set up specifically with that purpose in mind. Scrutiny and constructive challenge should be supported, but if these groups are not moderated effectively, they can provide a conduit for abuse and harassment.

Although Facebook encourages respectful behaviour and takes action to protect '[private individuals](#)'¹³ from bullying and harassment, it permits 'open and critical discussion of people who are featured in the news or have a large public audience based on their profession or chosen activities' but does take action around 'credible threats' and 'hate speech'¹⁴.

Responding to abuse or harassment

There are a range of options for you to manage abuse or harassment on Facebook and full instructions are available on the [Facebook help page](#)¹⁵:

- If you want a post removed from Facebook, you can ask the person who posted it to remove it.
- If you don't like a story that appears in your News Feed, you can [hide it](#).
- If you are not happy with a post you're tagged in, you can [remove the tag](#).
- You can leave a [conversation](#) at any time, though the other people in the conversation will be notified and you will no longer receive messages from the conversation.
- You can [unfriend](#) or [block](#) another user; they will no longer be able to tag you or see things you post on your timeline.
- If the post goes against Facebook's Community Standards you can report it to Facebook.

Responding to abuse or harassment in Groups or Pages

Scrutiny and constructive challenge should be supported, although both can provide a conduit for abuse and harassment from individuals or groups if they are not moderated effectively.

Your council may have a policy or tactic on communicating and engaging with such groups, particularly if they have been set up to criticise the council, so you should take advice from the council's communications officers.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#bullying-and-harassment>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#attacks-on-public-figures>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/help/408955225828742?helpref=search&sr=6&query=unfriend>

There is no right or wrong way with regards responding to a group or page which regularly criticises the council or councillors; some believe that it is beneficial to engage constructively, to explain, inform or signpost and hopefully improve awareness, understanding and support, whilst others are more reluctant as it will require emotional energy and time and the likelihood of successful engagement may be limited.

If you are concerned about comments or postings about you in a group or page, you can [report the post to the Group Administrator](#).¹⁶ If you are concerned about a group that is abusive and you think it has broken Facebook's Community Standards, you can [report the group to Facebook](#).¹⁷

Managing and moderating your own Group or Page

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

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

The use of bad language can sometimes be unintentional and if you are the group or page administrator you can politely rebuke the individual and advise on expected conduct and an apology is often forthcoming.

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

You can:

- Block certain words or apply a 'profanity filter' in the settings, this will stop such postings appearing in your page;
- Hide or delete comments, photos or tags; and
- Ban or remove someone from your pages.

Useful guidance and instructions are available on the '[Banning and Moderation](#)'¹⁸ section of Facebook.

Administering a large Group can be a lot of work, particularly if group members are active. If that's the case, you might want to share the responsibility with other councillors, friends or

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/help/436113899837980?helpref=search&sr=1&query=report%20to%20admin>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/help/266814220000812?helpref=related>

¹⁸ https://www.facebook.com/help/248844142141117/?helpref=hc_fnav

trusted community members. Guidance on making other people administrators or 'moderators is available on [Facebook](#)¹⁹.

Tackling abuse on blogs

Blogs are a quick and easy way for members of the public or councillors to set up mini-websites to discuss and air views on matters of interest.

Occasionally, blogs may take an interest in local, community matters and some have been set up specifically to scrutinise the local council or councillors.

Whilst scrutiny is a key part of local democracy and accountability, on occasions, some blogs may make unfair comments or untrue allegations or may include abusive or threatening commentary. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, there are no 'community rules or standards' to moderate or challenge such content.

Depending on the nature of the comments, councillors therefore have several choices:

- Ignore the blog altogether and hope that few people read and become aware of the comments;
- Engage with the blogger and seek to assure, inform or correct the comments as appropriate. As with trolls however, this course of action may fuel and prolong the debate and abusive comments further; or
- If you are concerned that the blogger is harassing you, threatening you, spreading malicious communications or is defaming or libelling you, you may wish to record any evidence (e.g. take some screen shots) and seek further legal advice or refer the matter to the Police.

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/help/148640791872225?helpref=search&sr=3&query=group%20admin>