

Guidance on Councillors' use of Social Media and Mobile Devices

Who does this guidance apply to?

1. This guidance applies to Councillors attending Council meetings. It is also general good practice for professional conduct.

What is the purpose of this guidance?

2. The purpose of this guidance is to provide parameters for Councillors' appropriate use of social media and mobile devices, in particular, during Council meetings.
3. Improper use of social media and mobile devices could be used as grounds for challenging a contentious decision, or result in complaints of breaching the [Councillors Code of Conduct](#), for a failure to show respect for others or bringing the Council or the office of councillor into disrepute.
4. Councillors are asked to follow these guidelines to ensure that they comply with the [Councillors Code of Conduct](#).

Good practice on the use of social media and mobile devices

5. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram and blogs (web logs). Types of mobile devices include smart-phones, tablets and laptops.
6. Councillors may use these and other platforms in their official capacity, but should remember that the public may still perceive them as acting in that capacity even when that is not their intention.
7. Councillors should:
 - (a) consider whether they need to set appropriate privacy settings for any blog or networking site – especially if it is a private, non-political blog;
 - (b) keep an eye out for defamatory, untrue or obscene posts from others and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that they condone such views;
 - (c) be careful about any connection with service users who are vulnerable adults or children, as this could be regarded as a safeguarding issue;
 - (d) ensure they use Council facilities appropriately and comply with the [Acceptable Use of ICT Equipment and Systems Policy](#);
 - (e) be aware that by publishing information that they could not have accessed without their position as a councillor, they will be seen as acting in their official capacity;
 - (f) be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals; and
 - (g) be aware that the libel laws cover blogs, social media and other forms of digital content publication.

8. Councillors should not:
- (a) place images or text on their site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission
 - (b) post comments that they would not be prepared to make face to face;
 - (c) refer in a blog to any information identified by the Council as confidential or exempt;
 - (d) disclose information given to them in confidence by anyone or information acquired by them which they believe or are aware is of a confidential nature;
 - (e) publish personal data of individuals except with express written permission to do so;
 - (f) give the impression that they are expressing the views of the Council where it is not appropriate to do so; and
 - (g) if they are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, publish anything on their blog that might suggest they do not have an open mind about a matter they are involved in determining.

The use of social media and mobile devices at meetings

9. Use mobile devices sparingly, discreetly and with common sense at meetings, considering the impression they are giving to others. Councillors should remember that most meetings are now webcast.
10. There may be occasions when texting or emailing between Councillors during meetings on matters relevant to the debate at hand may be valuable (on the same basis as circulating paper notes to other Councillors). Mobile devices also enable Councillors to manage their busy lives when time is at a premium. However, frequent use of these devices during meetings may give the public the impression that the councillor is not paying full attention to an item that is being discussed in a debate on a decision that is to be made.

Examples of acceptable use:

- (a) reading and annotating meeting papers and background information relevant to that meeting;
- (b) communicating with others at the meeting on matters relevant to the debate at hand; and
- (c) sending and receiving communications to/from home relating to domestic circumstances (e.g. childcare arrangements), within reason and with common sense.

Avoid the following:

- (a) using social media during quasi-judicial meetings or during the consideration of confidential or exempt items of business at meetings; and
- (b) frequently checking emails and messages that are not related to the meeting;
- (c) taking and sending electronic images of proceedings; and
- (d) extended periods of use that suggests that insufficient attention is being paid to the meeting.