

An introduction to social media for councillors

This is an introduction for councillors on the use of social media. It includes an overview of how and why councillors should use it, their responsibilities, ways to stay safe and approaches to handling negativity.

Objectives

Getting started on social media

- Why should councillors use social media?
- Communicating on social media
- Prioritising what social media platform you use

Staying safe and secure online

- Setting yourself up to stay safe on social media
- Separating your councillor role and family life online

Your responsibilities as a councillor

- The golden rule to follow
- Understanding what you can and can't post online, including legally

How to deal with negativity and abuse online

- Learning not to 'feed' social media 'trolls'
 - LGA 'rules of engagement' – share our digital citizenship infographics
 - Being confident to block and delete followers
 - Taking a break from social media
-

Getting started on social media

Why should councillors use social media?

Effective communication is at the heart of success for any councillor. Over the last few years, social media has transformed how elected representatives communicate with their communities. For some, their first time using social media happens after their election as a councillor, whereas others are already experienced at using social media. This guide offers support and guidance to all.

There are many key benefits to using social media as a councillor. Using social media, in particular highly used platforms like Facebook, enables councillors to engage regularly with many residents across all age groups and demographics, including local residents who are much less likely to read leaflets or attend council meetings. This has been demonstrated in the COVID-19 pandemic. With face-to-face meetings impossible for a long time, social media enabled people to stay in touch with their elected representatives (and vice versa) in a period in which community support and engagement were vital.

Using social media enables councillors to engage regularly with residents across all age groups and demographics

Communicating on social media

Social media communication is not only useful for sharing information, although that is a key part of it. There are many other advantages of using social media, including that it enables councillors to have a digital 'listening ear' on online conversations about what's going on in your local community whether they are happening on Facebook pages or groups, Twitter hashtags for your town, or on Nextdoor – a networking service for neighbourhoods.

Social media platforms also offer councillors a cost-effective and speedy way to report back to residents about issues, the work of the council and what you're doing as their councillor. While traditional communication methods like leaflets and local media coverage are still important, posts on social media are immediate and offer you the opportunity to respond to what's going on in your local area swiftly and with impact.

Prioritise what social media platform you use

There are many, many social media platforms available to use. Some are much more used than others, however. Statista estimates that there are

more than 53 million social media users in the UK in 2022. Facebook has the largest market share with 56 per cent of visits in 2021, followed by Twitter with almost 24 per cent.

Different social media platforms will give you the opportunity to speak with different audiences – different members of your local community. Many people use Twitter to access news. Twitter is made up of very short messages ('posts') – there can be a maximum of 240 characters in one tweet. Instagram is a highly visual platform – it's all about photos and videos. While you can add photos and videos to Twitter, doing so is not its main aim – Instagram, on the other hand, is focused on images and engagements with them.

As a councillor, you need to use your time effectively – you're a busy person! Our advice is to start by prioritising one key social media platform and become confident and impactful on it before deciding to move on to others.

You may wish to start with Facebook because it has the widest reach across all audiences in the UK. Facebook is the main social media platform that residents in your area will be looking at for information.

There are other options, though. Twitter is a great platform to be able to quickly find out information and have real-time, one-to-one conversations with immediate feedback. Instagram is a highly visual platform. To use it you'll need good photos and video content.

Nextdoor is a highly locally focused platform which can be very useful to reach people who you know live in your community. Nextdoor doesn't have the same reach as Facebook, however.

Staying safe and secure online

How to set yourself up to stay safe using social media

While there are many advantages to having an active and engaging presence on social media, it is really important for you to stay safe and secure as a user. There are key actions you can take to protect yourself online, whatever social media platform you use.

The first is to make sure you use a secure login email and password. We'd suggest you:

- don't use your councillor email address which is likely to be well known
- different passwords for each account.

You should set up two-factor authentication on your accounts on all the social media platforms you use. This offers you extra security for your accounts. Two-factor authentication (or multi-factor authentication) means that, when you log in to your account, you'll need to not just add your password but also either:

- enter a code which is sent to your mobile phone number or email
- or, alternatively, authorise your login on an app on your phone.

Keeping your personal and family life private

Make sure you maintain a divide between your personal and family life, and your public profile. On Facebook, we strongly recommend you use a Facebook 'Page' rather than a 'profile' for your councillor role. This can help you maintain separation and balance. Other social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, have similar options too. Make sure you also set up the privacy control settings offered on each platform.

Be aware that councillors are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of social media, whether it's published on a personal account or not. It's highly recommended that you never post or share anything online, or on any social media account, that you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.

It is easy to share information about yourself online. As a councillor, you need to think carefully about what, and how much, content you put out in the public domain. Before you start posting, it is worthwhile thinking not only about what is safe to post, but also about what you are comfortable with posting and what you want to be available long into the future.

As a rule, don't share personal information such as your personal phone number, date of birth, home address – or photos that make any of these obvious. Remember that you also need to consider the personal data of others around you. You might be comfortable living your life in the public glare, but you need to ask yourself: "Are my family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues also comfortable to do so?"

From a security point of view, think carefully before you post. Once a piece of content is on social media, you lose nearly all control about how it will be used. As with emails, you will need to watch out for phishing scams, cons, and malicious software.

Your responsibilities as a councillor

The golden rule to follow

There's a golden rule for using social media, which is: if you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first before doing anything else.

Social media works in the public domain. Once something is published it is 'out there' for everyone to see and very easily it can:

- go viral
- be altered or changed without your consent
- be taken out of context
- be shared around the world.

Using social media as an elected (or co-opted) member of a council is very different from using it as someone who isn't. Councillors have additional responsibilities because of their position.

If you are unsure about posting something, stop and ask for advice first.

Understand what you can and can't post online, including legally

Councillors are personally responsible for the social media content they create, publish and share. Being a councillor will not prevent someone else pursuing legal action following the publication of an untrue statement. In such a situation, it is likely that you will be held personally liable.

Councillors should be mindful of the difference between fact and opinion. They also play a central role in preventing the spread of disinformation. Think twice before you press 'share' or 'retweet'!

On social media, councillors should also keep in mind their responsibility in relation to confidential information, copyright, data protection, the pre-election period and exempt reports. Councillors are still subject to the Code of Conduct on social media where there is an explicit link between the content posted and council business or your role as councillor. As a general rule, councillors should demonstrate good conduct at all times and so should act as though their public engagement on social media falls in scope of the Code of Conduct.

When posting to social media you should remember that:

- you are an elected representative of your council
- what you post can affect the reputation of your council
- your council is a corporate decision-making body – you can't, independently, make decisions for the council on social media

- some issues and communications are best left to your council's official social media channels, which are usually managed by officers
- having a single voice or message can be critical in some situations – for example, in the event of major flooding
- you don't have to respond to or comment on everything on social media – and sometimes it's best not to.

Think before you press 'publish'! There is a simple test. If you would be reluctant to say something face-to-face to a group of strangers in the street, then you probably shouldn't say it on social media.

How to deal with negativity and abuse online

Learn not to feed social media 'trolls'

Unfortunately, on every social media platform, there can be other users who are negative and abusive. Such people are often referred to as 'trolls'. Trolls are not easy to deal with – the best way is 'not to feed them'. By this, we mean don't respond to what they post, which is designed to upset, elicit a response or to further their own goals. Your best response is to either to ignore what they have posted, or (if it's on your own page or profile) to delete or hide their comment, so your other followers don't see it either.

Digital citizenship 'rules of engagement'

The LGA has produced [digital citizenship 'rules of engagement' infographics](#) for councillors, which you can add to your social media profile. These set out the social media code you will follow on social media and how you expect your followers to behave.

Be confident to block and delete followers

It is easy to delete, block followers, and report individuals who are persistently abusive to you, including to the police. It is sensible and reasonable to block some people – not just to protect yourself, but also to protect others who follow you who may also feel threatened by what they write in comments.

Taking a break from social media

Don't be afraid of taking a break from social media if you feel you need to – to protect your mental health and wellbeing. You can easily temporarily unpublish your Facebook page or Twitter account and give yourself some 'time offline'.

Guide to the role of councillors on social media

Councillors can use social media to communicate with their local community and listen in on the conversations people are having. This guide explores the role councillors can play on social media, how to engage in healthy debate and what to consider when publishing or sharing.

Objectives

- **Understanding the different roles that councillors can play on social media**
 - Information-sharing from the council
 - Information-sharing with the community
 - Civic and ceremonial roles
 - The virtual doorstep
 - Having a measured response to online opinions
 - Considering party political dimensions for councillors on social media
 - **Engaging in healthy debate and tackling misinformation online**
 - Abiding by the golden rule
 - Encouraging positive, polite and constructive debate
 - Remembering that your behaviour influences others
 - Using your voice to tackle misinformation and inaccuracy
 - **Considering the Code of Conduct while being active on social media**
 - Is information already in the public domain?
 - Be aware of what you share
 - The Councillor Code of Conduct still applies
-

Understanding the different roles that councillors can play on social media

It's important to understand how social media can enable councillors to play different roles. Having clarity about this will help councillors to consider their online activity, the types of information to share, what to prioritise, and how to use their time to achieve the greatest impact.

Information-sharing from the council

Councillors have a unique role to play on social media as elected representatives. Councillors have access to information and knowledge at an earlier stage than most people and can use social media to disseminate it to the public. It is important to first make sure you are allowed to make information public (more on this below).

Councillors can share updates about council meetings and decisions made in them, votes, planning applications and deadlines, information on events and much more. Over time, councillors will start to understand what types of council information interest local residents most – based on the quality, and quantity, of engagement with posts.

Committee chairs, cabinet members, group or council leaders also have an opportunity to share information that is relevant to their enhanced council role, including to an audience wider than the ward they represent.

Councillors have a unique role to play on social media as elected representatives.

Information sharing with the community

Councillors are in key positions to be able to access and share a wide range of information beyond that from their own council. Councillors are often on mailing lists and at meetings where information relevant to their local community is shared. This might be from another local authority, for example, from the county council or from an MP or business group. You can enhance your reach by building your reputation with your audience for being someone who shares such information.

Civic and ceremonial roles

Social media offers councillors who hold civic or ceremonial roles for a council a real opportunity to reach out and engage with the public beyond meeting them in person or coverage in traditional media, such as local newspapers.

Mayors are often the public face of councils. Greater social media activity by them can really help to raise both the profile of the council and awareness of what the mayor (or equivalent) is doing. This can increase public participation and understanding of council's work, increasing the impact of the social media content.

The virtual doorstep

Councillors who are active on social media have a great opportunity to monitor – or 'take the temperature' of – public opinion.

There will always be a place for opinion polls and surveys which can help measure views formally including officially measuring performance. But by being part of community Facebook groups and keeping an eye on what's being talked about, or monitoring what people are sharing on Twitter by following local hashtags, councillors can quickly take note of what local residents think – and act on it if they need to.

This might be monitoring how the public responds to council decisions or community issues. Monitoring what's happening on social media can be likened to being able to have hundreds and hundreds of doorstep conversations each week.

Having a measured response to online opinions

There is a risk that councillors can overreact to views being expressed online. It's key to have a measured response and to remember that not all residents' views are represented online. Listening to opinions online is a helpful way to get a flavour of views in your local area, but it is important to consider the bigger overall picture too.

Councillors and the party political dimension on social media

Many, but not all, councillors are members of a party political group. This adds to their function a further role as advocates of their political party in the community. It is important to remember that, in your role as a councillor, you are a representative of everyone in your ward, not only those who support your political party. Indeed, those councillors who are most popular are usually those that have built a reputation for helping everyone in their community regardless of their political views.

Party politics can also be one of the main triggers for abuse and aggression on social media which can be particularly corrosive if it is between councillors of different political parties on the same council. Residents do not like to see their councillors being rude or hostile to one another on

social media. It is vital that any political disagreements are handled politely and with respect to opponents.

Being a member of a political party can also often draw councillors into issues well outside the remit or control of their local council. This is particularly true if their party is in Government – when councillors may find themselves criticised by residents or other councillors for decisions made in Westminster. It is up to the individual to decide whether to engage with these issues. Getting involved with one national issue will mean that residents expect your thoughts on others too.

Engaging in healthy debate and tackling misinformation

People in the public eye, including councillors, play an important role within the community, and are regarded as influential in their local area. This is just as true online and on social media as it would be in person or in traditional media. The actions, tone, manner, and language that councillors use online has wide impact – not just personally, but for many others online.

Abide by the golden rule

Follow the golden rule – do as you would be done by. It is never pleasant to be on the receiving end of negative posts or abusive comments. As a councillor, you need to rise above such behaviour, make sure the way you respond to others is polite and positive, and encourage healthy debate on your own social media accounts and those of others.

Encouraging positive, polite and constructive debate

There is a range of ways to encourage positive behaviour online by others. Your first step should be to add the [LGA Digital citizenship 'rules of engagement' infographics](#) to your accounts. These are downloadable infographics which are easy to add to your profile to make it clear to other social media users that you intend to use your account in a positive and constructive manner.

When you post to your own accounts, make sure you frame your requests for engagement from other users in a positive way. Ask people to keep their posts positive and polite, reminding them that this is possible even if they disagree with other people's views.

Finally, you can make sure that the way you respond to what other people share is also polite and positive, even if you disagree with it or if it is from your political opponents.

Remember – your behaviour influences others

Your behaviour as a councillor on social media will influence others. If members of the public see comments a councillor has made which are not constructive or are negative, it is more likely to make them think that it's ok for them to use poor behaviour online as well. This doesn't mean you can't disagree with what people say, but the tone in which you do so is important.

Remember – it is not defensible to complain that you are on the receiving end of negativity or abuse, if comments you've made yourself are not polite.

Use your voice to tackle misinformation and inaccuracy

If you see information being shared that is inaccurate or false, say so. You can comment on the post saying that it isn't true. You could follow this up with a private or direct message to the person sharing the information telling them it's false and asking them to remove the post.

It is also very important for councillors to verify the accuracy of what they are posting or sharing themselves. It is easy to quickly share content from elsewhere without checking only to find, later, that it is inaccurate.

You can report posts to social media companies, flagging them as being not true. Where relevant, you can report posts to council authorities, for example, to your council's media team if you feel there might be need for rebuttal, or to your council's monitoring officer.

Consider the Code of Conduct while being active on social media

Councillors need to be aware that they are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of social media. Publishing an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a defamation action for which you will be personally liable. The same applies if you pass on any similar untrue statements you receive.

Is information already in the public domain?

Also consider if information you are considering sharing is already in the public domain or not. If it isn't, is it information that is sensitive financially or politically? Think about what the ramifications might be for you personally if you share information on social media that has, up to that point, been confidential.

Be aware of what you share

Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

It's highly recommended that councillors should never post or share anything online or on social media that they would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.

Using a Facebook Page for your councillor activity on Facebook and a profile for your personal postings does allow separation. If you want to keep your social media activity private, you can set very strict privacy settings on your accounts. Most social media platforms do have the ability to do this, but they have different actions to do this, so make sure you have got it set right.

Overall, though, it is extremely important to remember that there is still a risk that posts or activity on your personal profile will be seen and shared publicly – no matter how strict your privacy settings are. Saying it is private is no defence.

The Councillor Code of Conduct still applies

The [Councillor Code of Conduct](#) and relevant legislation applies online and in social media. If you are referring online in any way to your role as a councillor, you are deemed to be acting in your 'official capacity' and any conduct may fall within the code.

Digital citizenship: support and resources for councillors

The LGA is developing a range of guidance and tools to support councillors and candidates in their online communications. This will be developed over time, in partnership with our colleagues in the Welsh LGA, the Northern Ireland LGA and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Infographics

Rules of engagement

This infographic can be pinned to your social media profile to outline the ways in which you intend to engage with people online. These rules are designed to give all users a clear 'code' by which they should operate, with a clear statement that users can be blocked, or posts deleted, if they fail to participate in a civil manner.

The images come with ALT text and a 'long description'. If you choose to post the image your social media page please try to use the ALT text as appropriate.

To download and use the image, please click on an image to visit it on a separate page, then 'save as' and post to your desired location.

Councillors

Rules of engagement

Welcome to my page, which aims to communicate my activities as a councillor.

If you wish to be a part of this online community, you must agree to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

RULE 1
Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

RULE 2
Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

RULE 3
Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

RULE 4
Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

RULE 5
For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously.

If any of these rules are broken, page admins reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report content to the police if necessary.

It may not be possible to respond to all queries on this page due to time constraints - if you have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.

Download

at www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/images/43.4%20Engagement_Cllr.png

Rules of engagement

Welcome to my page, which aims to communicate my activities as a councillor. If you wish to be a part of this online community, you must agree

to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

Rule 1: Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

Rule 2: Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

Rule 3: Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

Rule 4: Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

Rule 5: For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously.

If any of these rules are broken, page admins reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report content to the police if necessary.

It may not be possible to respond to all queries on this page due to time constraints - if you have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.