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Overview of 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:

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 - **Staying safe and secure online**
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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'

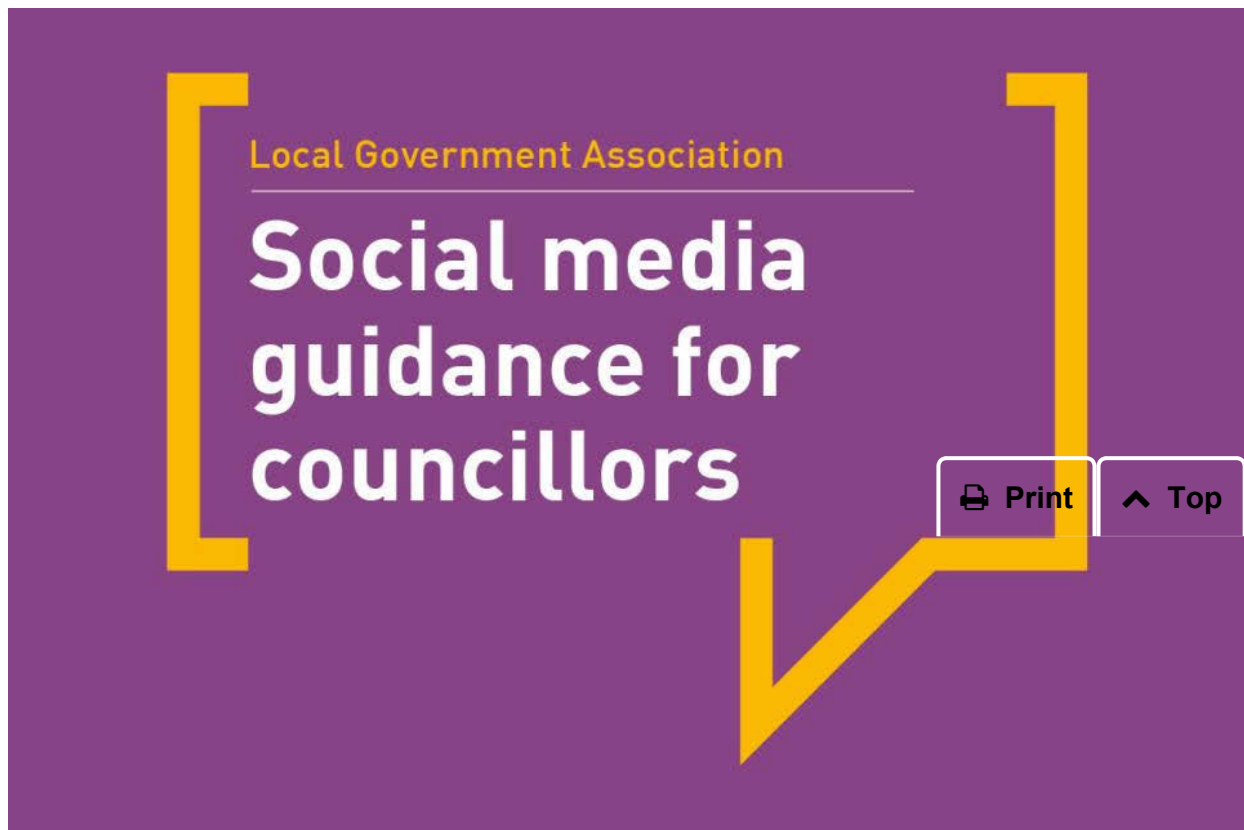
The LGA has produced **digital citizenship 'rules of engagement' infographics** [<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/digital-citizenship>] for councillors, which you can add to your social media profile. These set out the social media 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’.



Social media guidance for councillors

The LGA has produced a series of guides to support councillors in using social media.

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