

Social Media Guide

For Councillors



March 2021

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This guide has been produced by the SLDC Communications Team to assist elected members with their use and understanding of social media platforms

Introduction

People are now turning first to the web to find everything from information about days out, entertainment, shopping, to making connections with friends and colleagues.

People expect to be able to comment and contribute on everything from online versions of newspapers to items they purchase from online retailers like Amazon.

Residents will increasingly expect that local government will be able to provide its services online with the same level of interactivity that they find everywhere else. The pace of change is rapid – it seems it wasn't that long ago that email was a novel way to contact your councillor and council.

Already many councillors and almost all councils are interacting with the people they represent online through social media.

Certainly there are obstacles to engaging with social media. These tools present new challenges to the structure, working culture, staff management and technical strategy for councils.

The problem for councils though, is that not engaging represents a far greater risk than engaging.

Residents will still use these networks to talk about us, whether we add our voice to the conversation or not. The national infrastructures being built to improve government and public services will still exist, and councils will be expected to engage with them.

Residents will expect their council to engage with them on their terms, via their preferred channels, and to be openly available online.

SLDC's Customer Connect programme has at its core a commitment to develop our digital channels for the benefit of our residents and we have also signed up to the government's Local Digital Declaration.

If you would like a copy of this document in another format such as large print, Braille, audio or in a different language, please call **01539 733333** or email **customer.services@southlakeland.gov.uk**



The initiative, launched by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Government Digital Service, aims to get local authorities to work towards a collective ambition for local public services in the internet age.

Many of the commitments in the Local Digital Declaration align closely with the aims and objectives of Customer Connect:

- To design services that best meet the needs of citizens
- To use technology to offer the flexible tools and services we need
- To protect citizens' privacy and security
- To deliver better value for money

The overall ambition is to help create the conditions for the next generation of local public services, where technology is an enabler rather than a barrier to service improvements, and services are easier and more convenient for residents to access.

In return the government has pledged to work with councils to support any work to achieve these ambitions, including funding to develop particular projects.

Councils signed up to the Local Digital Declaration will also be able to share ideas and lessons learnt.

SLDC had to submit details of its plans to be accepted on to the Local Digital Declaration network of councils.

We have agreed to work towards the principles of the Local Digital Declaration through the Customer Connect programme and have made a specific commitment to design online and offline services around the needs of our customers.

As representatives of their local areas and the democratically elected leaders of their organisations and partnerships, councillors can play a crucial part in delivering these ambitions and the use of social media can be a key element.

This guide is meant as a brief introduction to social media for councillors, outlining how social media can be used to:

- Support councillors' leadership roles
- Create a space for community conversation
- Keep a 'finger on the pulse' of local needs and issues
- Campaign for important local issues

It is targeted particularly at councillors who have some IT skills, and would like to know more. Maybe you're comfortable using email, or already have a Facebook account for personal use, but are reluctant or unsure about using social media for council business.

This guide is designed to help you find out more about how you can use social media to support your role as a democratic leader in your local area.

PART ONE: Social media tools

When people talk about social media, they often make reference to some well-known tools or products.

Although there are many more than we can list here, we'll highlight the main three widely used products which are characterised by their ease of use and are free or low cost.

Facebook

Using social networks as a councillor requires a different approach to using it as an ordinary citizen.

Many councillors may already use Facebook in a personal capacity in the same way as anyone else would – to share personal news, information and holiday snaps with people they already know.

Other councillors use their Facebook accounts more openly, 'friending' (that is, by allowing them to view their accounts, sharing information with) people they don't know personally. Facebook allows politicians to create 'pages' which is a way of keeping personal use and professional use separate.

A 'page' is similar to a regular Facebook account in style, but it is open for anyone registered on Facebook to see. Facebook members can 'like' the page to receive updates and demonstrate their interest or support.

On a page you can provide a political profile and can share information with supporters without disclosing personal networks or worrying that the wrong people will see the personal pictures of you as a child that your friends are showing each other.

Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging service (280 characters maximum) that allows networks of users to stay connected and update each other on their activities wherever they are.

Once you have invested the time in building interesting and useful networks it is a real aid to productivity and knowledge sharing.

On Twitter, people are all identified in the same way, by an @ sign and their username. For example, someone could be registered as @joebloggs, or @cllrjohnsmith. You can find their Twitter address by using their full user name without the @ sign.

Blogs

Blogs are simply online journals but there are a number of things which make them significant.

Firstly, they are really the first time that it has been easy to publish into a web environment.

Until recently you have had to be geeky enough to write code or pay for dedicated applications. With a blog you use your web browser to assess free, or cheap, blogging tools, write your content, press 'save' and your content is published on the web.

The second significant thing about blogs was the permalink. Excuse the jargon, but with normal websites, pointing at interesting content was a risky business as re-designs or changes of content could break those links.

With a blog each post has a unique and persistent 'URL' (the unique address for the file) that makes that content linkable to for the life of the blog. This simple fact enables rich lines of thought to be built up between different blogs or within the same blog. For all their simplicity blogs are, in many ways, still a powerful social media tool.

There are many free blogging tools such as Blogger.com or Wordpress.com which make it easy to set up a blog in a few minutes. However, gaining readership can take longer.

Have a search for a few other blogging councillors to pick up some tips and ideas how to engage audiences.

PART TWO: Why use social media?

10 Good reasons to consider using social media

1. It boosts the number of people you can reach when talking about the good work you have done for your area. This includes the local press who can pick up on your stories without you having to press release them.
2. Unlike traditional media/leaflet dropping, it allows for two-way communication so you get immediate feedback on key issues in your ward and can react accordingly.
3. It allows you to connect with a different type of resident – who perhaps can't give up time to come to council meetings or surgeries.
4. With Twitter you can follow or create conversations on many different interest levels, so you might follow some people because they tweet about your party and others because they are involved in local issues. Some may talk about the issues faced by councillors generally, while another group might be based around your favourite football team. So depending on who you follow, Twitter can become a one-stop-shop for the news and views you are interested in.
5. Campaigns can 'go viral' with social media. If you are trying to save a local amenity from closure or hoping to prevent an unpopular planning application from being approved, these campaigns can grow exponentially if they are picked up online. A blog can help explain the cause and Twitter and facebook will help you spread the word. It worth noting here that you would have to clear that you were acting as an individual Councillor and not as the official voice of the Council.
6. Help bring your community together by being at the centre of the conversations that matter and understanding the concerns of residents in your ward.
7. The conversations are already happening without you. Many citizens are already using social media to talk about local issues – and they are often bemoaning the lack of a response from their council or councillors. This is an opportunity to become involved. Even if you can't solve the problem straight away, you can acknowledge it and offer to look into it.
8. It's simple and cheap to do. Using social media costs nothing more than time, there are no printing costs and you can do it from the comfort of your home or office, rather than out in the elements.
9. It's one of the best ways to engage with young people. Young people are increasingly using social media as a means of communication and entertainment and if we hope to get them involved in local democracy it is important to use the tools they use to speak to them.
10. People will connect with you on a personal level. When handled properly, social media accounts are great at letting people get to know you a little better, allowing them to warm to you rather than just seeing you as an extension of the council.

PART THREE: Staying out of trouble online

Any form of communication is rife with the possibility of misunderstandings. Social media is perhaps no more or no less vulnerable to this, but there are some new ways to misfire with your message.

Although the best use of social media is conversational in tone, publishing to the web is still publishing. What you've 'said' on the web is written down and it's considered a 'permanent form'...even if you later delete a post it will be stored somewhere, may have been shared or copied.

As you get started in social media and build your online profile, there are a few things to bear in mind. While there's no additional legal or ethical burden around using social media, the usual rules still apply and you need to think about them in this new context.

The following legal and ethical guidance applies to councillors in England and highlights some of the more obvious issues.

If you are in any doubt, speak to the council's monitoring officer or legal services. Almost all of these pitfalls can be avoided if your online content is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. There are some additional duties around using social media for electoral campaigning and extra care needs to be taken when writing on planning matters.

1. Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you are informed about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A successful libel claim against you will result in an award of damages against you.

2. Copyright

Placing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

3. Data Protection

Avoid publishing the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

4. Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything on your blog that might suggest you don't have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not, the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

5. Obscene material

It goes without saying that you should avoid publishing anything in your blog that people would consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

6. Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. And there are additional requirements, such as imprint standards for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk¹⁶

7. The council's legal position

Material published by a local authority as an organisation is, for obvious reasons, restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material and, in relation to other material, should not persuade the public to a particular view, promote the personal image of a particular councillor, promote an individual councillor's

proposals, decisions or recommendations, or personalise issues. Nor should the council assist in the publication of any material that does any of the above.

8. The Members' Code of Conduct

It's worth pointing out that Councillors can have 'blurred identities'. This means you have a social media account where you comment both as a Councillor and as an individual. For example a Facebook account where you've posted about a great night out (personal) and another time explained the Council position on a new policy (Councillor). It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a Councillor, but it could be less clear to others.

As a point of advice, whilst there are a number of factors which will come into play which are more a question of judgment than a hard and fast line, it is worth assuming that any online activity can be linked to your official role. This is because the judgment of whether you are perceived to be acting as a Councillor will most likely be taken by someone else. Unless you've gone to significant effort to keep an online persona completely separate from your Councillor identity, you are unlikely to be able to claim that you were acting in a completely private capacity.

Such blurred identities might also have implications where your views are taken as those of your organisation or political party, rather than your personal opinion. There is a need therefore to get your position on social media accounts/profiles clear so that it cannot be misinterpreted that you are acting as the corporate voice for the Council. Indeed, there is an important difference between communicating on behalf of the Council, for example blogging as an un-elected Mayor, or as a Councillor or as a private citizen and the former will be held to a higher standard than the latter.

With this latter point in mind, you need to be aware that how you use your online identity will also determine how online content will be treated in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct. Councillors are expected to communicate politically. The key, however, to whether your online activity is subject to the Code of Conduct is whether you are giving the impression that you are acting as a Councillor. And that stands

whether you are in fact acting in an official capacity or simply giving the impression that you are doing so.

Aspects of the Members' Code of Conduct as defined in Part 5 of SLDC's Constitution will apply to your online activity in the same way it does to other written or verbal communication you undertake.

Members should comply with the general principles of the Code in what they publish and what they allow others to publish.

You will need to be particularly aware of the following sections of the Code:

- You must treat others with respect and promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their sex, race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. You should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees.
- You must not disclose any information given to you as a Member in breach of any confidence

PART FOUR: Avoiding gaffes and maintaining good social media practice

Just use common sense

Although some of these warnings may seem stark, they shouldn't put you off engaging online. Use your common sense.

The things that can get you in hot water anywhere else are the same things to avoid on social media. Most councillors who are using social media engage with citizens in entirely constructive and often colourful fashions without ever engaging the Code of Conduct or running foul of the law.

Councillors, just like anyone, should also take due regard of internet security. Use secure passwords (generally over eight characters long and using a mix of letters and numbers) and never share your password with anyone. If you are using shared IT equipment, don't store your password on the computer.

There are few additional things to be aware of to ensure you are well-respected online. For those new to the online world it can take a short time to get used to the culture of the web.

Make your commenting policy clear

If you have a blog or a Facebook page, you will need to take note of the comments that other people make on your site. It may be a fine line to tread, but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand on your site then it can put off other members of your community and you may even be called to account under the Code of Conduct.

For blogs, the easiest way to handle this is to moderate comments and to state clearly on your site that you're doing so and reasons why comments may be rejected.

For Facebook or other social networks, where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to regularly check on messages (you can be notified by email) or, far less preferably, disable message posting.

It is worth noting that you cannot moderate Twitter as such, but you can 'block people' who are posting inappropriate comments.

Allow disagreement

Some comments may be out of line, but on the other hand deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will backfire. You can't stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, then linking back to your site and saying you are gagging those who disagree with you.

Think before you publish

You can't un-ring that bell. Words can't be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off post or tweet it will probably have already been read and will be indexed or duplicated in places on the web beyond your reach.

Beware the irony

Few writers are able to communicate sarcasm or irony through short online messages. It's probably best to assume that you're one of those that can't.

Don't be creepy

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that's not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Savvy internet users are used to this, but some people can feel a bit of unease when their council, local police service or councillor begins 'following' them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship. One way around this is that you could wait to be followed yourself first, before following the person.

Be respectful

Set the tone for online conversations by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language and be honest and professional at all times. Make sure you respect other people's confidentiality – don't disclose non-public information or the personal information of others.

Be credible and consistent

Be accurate, fair and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and debate. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications.

Be honest about who you are

It's important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clear about your own personal role (see advice on 'blurred identities' under the Members Code of Conduct section)

Be active and be responsive

You don't need to update every day, but having a steady flow of updates will keep your followers engaged and interested. Likewise, respond to questions and comments in an appropriate and timely manner to keep those conversations going.

Own up: Social media is transparent

The best social media users admit mistakes rather than try to cover them up (which isn't possible online). Amending your text and acknowledging your mistake – perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction or providing an update section at the bottom of a post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and is much better than just deleting it when dealing with any online misfires.

Avoid arguments with vexatious commentators

You know that person who always shows up to public meetings and asks the tricky but entirely irrelevant questions? That person has an equally difficult cousin who likes to go online. As you begin to use social media, you'll find some argumentative characters out there.

Learn when to engage and when to walk away. You don't have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary. Also worth bearing in mind that people will have a lot more confidence to say things behind the protection of their keyboard than they would in a face-to-face conversation, so the world of social media is often an artificial environment.

Remember also that it is an 'echo chamber'...it has a habit of reinforcing particular views and prejudices because people create their own online communities of interest, that are largely populated by others who share their particular views and prejudices.

That means debates are not always particularly balanced or rational on certain forums, so don't assume the views being expressed there are representative of a wider audience.

Social media is great for many things, but it shouldn't always be taken too literally. Trust your judgement!

LGA checklist for councillors

How can you most effectively use social media as a councillor?

Be a person

You are likely to be more effective if your social media profile is you (with a picture of you) rather than an organisation with a logo.

Don't worry about reaching everyone in your ward

Social media will be more effective in some wards than others. University towns, urban areas with good broadband and mobile connections, and a working age population tend to work best. Wards with an older population and poor internet connectivity tend not to be so effective at reaching your ward. However don't let this stop you as connections are getting continuously improving as we move towards a higher level of digital inclusion.

Don't let it replace your traditional work

To be an effective councillor you won't stop meeting people and posting leaflets simply because you are posting online. The traditional work of a councillor still has to be done. You will know your residents best—consider which channel works best for them to connect with you, online and offline.

Think about the platform you'll use

If people in your ward are keen Facebook users then think seriously about Facebook. Twitter is popular among politicians because it's easy to use and connects people really well. Whichever one you choose, learn one at a time before even thinking of trying something else. You will know your residents better than anyone else so ask them which channel works best for them.

See how other councillors use it

Watch and learn from other councillors who are using social media. Have a chat to them. You'll very often find they will be happy to talk. Even to those from different parties.

Don't be a slogan machine

There is a really important decision to be taken over how political to be. You may have been elected on a party political ticket. But you are also a rounded human being. Social media is a chance for you to show your human side. Just posting party political content is likely to switch many people off and you may be talking only to the party faithful.

Have a conversation

Social media works best as a two-way conversation connecting people and sharing information. Good councillors do this every day face-to-face with residents—social media should be no different to this.

Don't wait for people to come to you

You've got your Facebook profile or your Twitter profile. People won't just come flocking to you. Run a search on your chosen profile for the name of your ward or an issue. Make a connection. Join a Facebook group set-up by residents. Comment on a blog, a website or a video clip.

Think about times when you won't post

From experience, many elected members say that Friday and Saturday nights are not always the best time to post overtly political messages. You won't always get the most rounded debates. Many councillors post sparingly on religious holidays.

To post in meetings or not?

Some authorities frown on posting from social media in meetings. Check the situation where you are. Residents, residents groups, journalists and bloggers are being encouraged to use social media from meetings. So adding your voice to the conversation may be a good thing as part of democracy. If you can post an update from a meeting and it doesn't hamper your role in that meeting then it's something to think about.

Don't have a row

Robust debate is fine from time-to-time and it's part of the cut and thrust of local politics. Most people can accept that. But remember how this debate is playing out to passers-by who are not interested in the detail of the issue. They are likely to be switched off. Take the row offline with a phone call or an email.

Don't be abusive

An absolute 'no no' is abusing people online. It doesn't work. It will make you look awful and is a sure-fire way to land you in trouble with your electorate, the party and the council. Be professional. Don't say anything you wouldn't be happy saying in a public meeting with the Press there.

Don't discuss case work detail

Case work can be reported to you on social media. Everything from uncollected rubbish and a cracked paving slab to concerns about child protection. As a good rule of thumb, ask residents to tell you the detail of an issue offline. Social media platforms usually have an easy-to-use way to talk one-to-one. Email and telephone can come into play too.

Pictures work

People respond really well to pictures. They don't have to be print quality. They don't have to be posed. If you are on a ward walk post some pictures. Include the people you are with if they are happy with that. Post pictures that show your human side too. That sunrise you just noticed. Your dog. Things that make you human.

Enjoy it

It's not meant to be scary. It's not meant to be hard work. Relax. Be yourself. Be a responsible elected member. Enjoy it.

