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6M: SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY
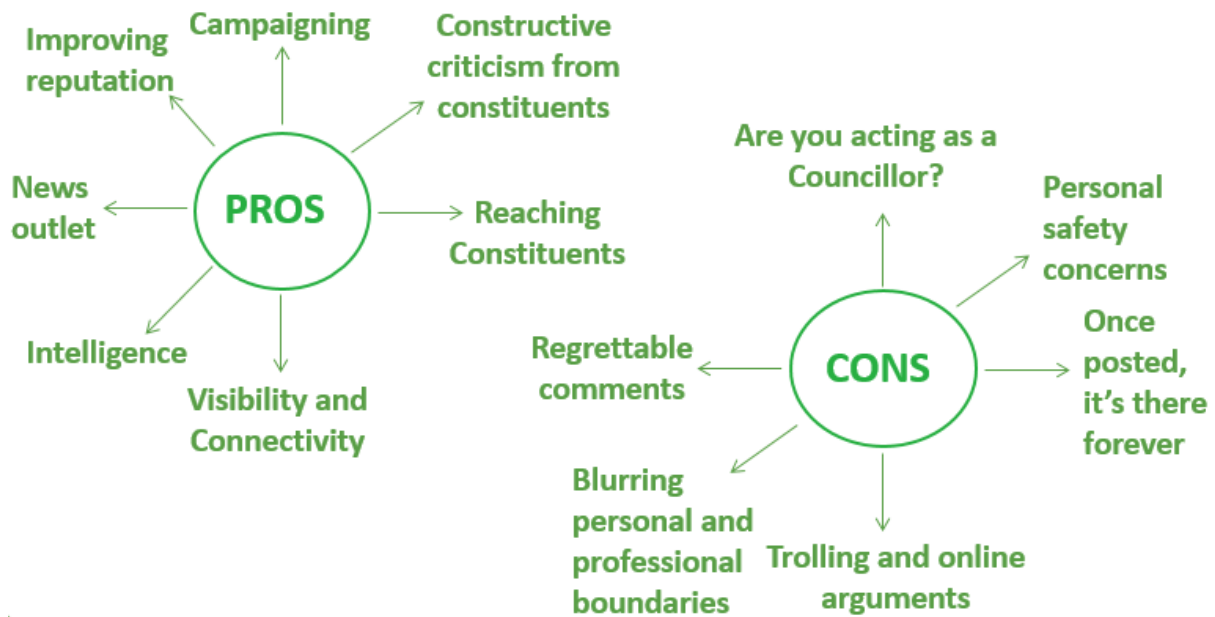
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1.0   INTRODUCTION

This Social Media Policy for Councillors is intended for use by all West Oxfordshire District Councillors and co-opted Members.

West Oxfordshire District Council has always been committed to innovation and creativity in the digital revolution which has taken place over recent years. We actively encourage the use of social media, which has become an integral part of everyday life for many of us as it is a useful way to communicate and connect with people all over the world.

This Policy on the use of Social Media by Councillors, does not seek to inhibit "freedom of expression", and means that Councillors are generally free to talk about, or write about, or otherwise express, their ideas and opinions without any censorship or interference - subject only to a few exceptions.

In respect of Councillors, social media has many benefits including raising a Councillor's profile, helping to deliver information to constituents in a fast and effective manner and for enhancing the reputation of the Council. However, there are also some pitfalls and some ways in which Councillors could use social media inappropriately, and this can have long lasting and significant consequences for the reputation of individual Councillors, their Political Groups and the Council as a whole.

2.0   'PROS' AND 'CONS' OF SOCIAL MEDIA

PROS

- Improving reputation
- Campaigning
- Constructive criticism from constituents
- News outlet
- Reaching Constituents
- Intelligence
- Visibility and Connectivity

CONS

- Are you acting as a Councillor?
- Personal safety concerns
- Regrettable comments
- Once posted, it's there forever
- Blurring personal and professional boundaries
- Trolling and online arguments

3.0 SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MEMBER CODE OF CONDUCT

The Social Media Policy for Councillors ('the Policy') is intended to assist Councillors when using social media, in a personal or professional capacity, to avoid potential breaches of their Code of Conduct and enable them to uphold the highest standards of conduct and ethics in their communications.

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the Council's Member Code of Conduct and sets out when certain types of conduct relating to the use of social media may be considered inappropriate by a Councillor.

Councillors are personally responsible for their conduct online and should always be mindful of the Code of Conduct and the Nolan Principles.

3.1 Acting in Capacity as a Councillor v Acting in Private / Personal Capacity

The Council's Member Code of Conduct (Part 6A of the Constitution) provides that a Councillor must comply with the obligations of the code when acting as a Councillor, which may include when a Councillor misuses their position or when a Councillor's actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that they are acting as a Councillor. This is a subjective test. However, there are actions which increase the likelihood of a Councillor being found as 'acting in their capacity as a Councillor'. For example, by identifying that they are a Councillor on their profile page, by using social media to campaign or to share Council news/developments with the public.

Councillors are advised to keep separate social media and on line accounts for professional Councillor matters and purely private and personal matters. Doing so enables a Councillor to separate posts about Council business or their role as a Councillor from personal posts.

However, while a Councillor may make a distinction on social media about what is a personal account or content, that does not mean that it would be considered by others to be personal. So, for example, if a Councillor posts on a personal social media platform about a matter that has sufficient nexus with their role as a Councillor, they may be deemed to be acting as a Councillor regardless of the fact that the post is on a purportedly personal account or is said to be from the individual acting in their personal capacity.

Further, while a Councillor may be clear on social media about what is personal content, such content could still be shared by other people in public forums or used by the media.

If a Councillor does decide to maintain only one social media account, there is increased risk around when they may be considered to be acting in capacity, and under the jurisdiction of the code, should a complaint be made.

If a Councillor wishes to keep just one account, they should be clear on what the account is used for. For example, if the account is personal, they should keep it private and refrain from using Council or Councillor terminology, referring to their role as a Councillor, or posting, sharing or commenting about Council business.

4.0   GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES WHEN USING SOCIAL MEDIA

In addition to the Member Code of Conduct, Councillors should be mindful of the following responsibilities:

- Councillors should take particular care to ensure that, in any comment or post they create, they do not imply that they are speaking on behalf of the Council as a whole.

- Once a post is made on social media, it is there for the world to see. Even if it is deleted this does not mean that someone has not already saved a copy of it. Councillors should never post anything on social media that they would not be prepared to discuss in public meetings, with the local media, with their constituents, and with their friends and family. Councillors should think carefully before engaging in activity on social media.

- Councillors should be honest about who they are on social media and not impersonate anybody if it could lead to bringing the Council into disrepute.

- Councillors should be mindful of the safety of themselves, their families and others. Any information posted to social media is public including pictures, profile information, friends list and comments. Individuals will be able to see your information and link you to other people, which may include vulnerable children and adults.

- Councillors should only share accurate information from reliable sources and should be mindful of 'fake news' stories and outlets. It's evidenced that anonymous profiles can contribute to the spread of misinformation or fake news, as well as cyberbullying, trolling and hate crime.

- Councillors should be trustworthy and not use social media to divulge any confidential or exempt information which has been shared with them.

- Councillors should keep their social media accounts secure and protected by passwords. They should not allow anybody else access to any of their social media platforms.

- Councillors should remain professional and polite when conversing with members of the public. This includes the use of private messaging, commenting on posts or replying.

- Councillors should take care when providing opinions or sharing or commenting on posts that they do not use or share content that might be deemed offensive, bullying or discriminatory or might otherwise bring the Council into disrepute.

- Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form. Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

- The way we interact with people in person is not just limited to the things we say. Body language, expression, tone of voice and who we are speaking to are all contributing factors to interaction. Considering this, Councillors should always consider how any comment/post they make on social media could be construed.

- Councillors should be mindful of the public perception of using social media during Council meetings and consider whether it is appropriate, particularly in regulatory meetings.

- Councillors should give careful consideration when sharing the posts of others, or when reacting to posts as reactions including smiley faces, thumbs up, laughing emoji's are all forms of on line communication.

4.1 Dealing with Mis-Information

It is difficult not to engage when you are the subject of rumours, misinformation and smear campaigns. While it is always tempting to respond and clarify every rumour and falsehood

circulated about you, it is also useful to think about the emotional, economic, time and costs of engaging; in many cases, rumours disappear as quickly as they emerged.

Some useful strategies to deal with such mis-information include:

Calmly try to understand who is behind the 'attack'. Most of the time, they are people with a clear agenda trying to gain control or to manipulate;

Correct the facts if you wish to do so; this can be done with a formal statement or if you can identify the source, then do it publicly by correcting their posts with facts and evidence. Remember that Officers are there to give advice, support and provide factual information;

Remember that rumours and misinformation are fed by repetition. It is good to defend your reputation but often the most efficient way is to do it once and then stop engaging this way;

Leave the environment the rumour is being spread within. A smear campaign tries to manipulate and gain control but no control can be gained if you do not participate. You may wish to advise your followers that you will be logging out of social media for a period of time, which gives the rumour time to calm down while protecting your own emotional and mental wellbeing;

Rumours and smear campaigns can be very stressful and at times, they can feel very isolating. Keep your self-confidence by talking to family, friends and others in your support network. Some may also feel able to counteract rumours with factual information;

If you can identify the source of the rumours and smear campaigns, you should document it and keep a record. This may be useful if further disciplinary or legal action is required.

The Council's Communications team is available to provide advice and support to all Councillors and can be consulted should a Councillor have a concern.

4.2   Potential Legal Issues

Councillors should be mindful that, in addition to a potential breach of the Code of Conduct, misuse of social media may give rise to other consequences.

The following issues, which may lead to criminal or civil legal proceedings, may also arise:

- Breach of Data Protection Legislation
- Publication of Obscene Material
- Incitement
- Copyright
- Harassment
- Discrimination

- Bias
- Defamation
- Judicial Review

5.0 TRAINING

Training on the use social media will be made available to Councillors by Democratic Services Officers. It is advised that Councillors undertake such training at least once in any term of office.

The Monitoring Officer, the Audit and Governance Committee or the Standards Sub-Committee, may also require a Councillor to undertake additional Social Media training as a result of concerns regarding their conduct.

If you are unsure, or have any questions about your social media use, contact the Monitoring Officer.

6.0 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION GUIDANCE

The LGA has also published a Checklist for Councillors. This can be found at Appendix A.

Appendix A

The LGA refer to 5 rules for councillors when using social media, as follows:

- Rule 1 – debate and disagreement are welcome, 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

LGA Checklist for Councillors

https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/digital-communications/social-1

Be a person

In the words of Digital Specialist Euan Semple, "Organisations don't tweet, people do". 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.