

Rushcliffe Borough Council

Social Media Guidance for Councillors

What is social media?

Most forms of engaging with others online can be regarded as social media – it covers a broad range of websites, online tools and other interactive electronic media which allow users to interact with others over the internet. This protocol is intended to offer guidance to all councillors who wish to use social media, whether by laptop, smart phone or other means of access to networking sites, blogs, tweets, messaging services or similar activities.

Examples of sites and applications to which this policy applies includes (but is not limited to) Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, blog sites, discussion forums, wikis, Whatsapp, Telegram and email. However, social media is evolving rapidly and new sites, applications and means of communicating will emerge over time.

What is the purpose of social media?

Social media is regarded as an effective tool for talking and listening to residents, local businesses and other organisations.

It is a useful tool for raising awareness of the work that you do, and for keeping in touch with news and other events in your community.

Purpose of this guide

This guide is designed to provide a structured approach to using social media in a way which is effective, lawful and does not compromise either the Council, or your position as a councillor.

However and whenever you engage online it is important to remember that you are personally responsible for what you publish on social media. The chances are, even if you were to delete a hasty or regrettable email, blog, tweet or other communication, someone somewhere will already have read it, and it will therefore be beyond your reach and control.

Inappropriate use of social media may have the following consequences:

- Reputational damage to you individually and/or to the Council
- Breach of code of conduct
- Civil or criminal legal action being taken against you relating to breaches of legislation

Legal responsibilities of Councillors and Co-opted Members

When using social media in any form, Councillors and Co-opted Members should remember that laws relating to defamation and copyright apply just as much to social media as they do to other forms of communication. The principles contained in the Council's Code of Conduct for Councillors and Members also applies use of social media.

You should, therefore:

- Respect copyright and intellectual property – do not post copyrighted images or text if you do not have the permission from the owner
- Take care not to make defamatory statements when using social media. You should ensure that you delete defamatory comments made by others on your site.
- Always comply with the council's data protection policy - do not post personal details or other information about people on social media unless they have expressly given you their consent to do so.
- Never post on matters which are private, restricted, confidential, or internal
- Remember that the council's equality policy and principles apply online to social media – take care not to post items which might be considered discriminatory under the terms of the Equality Act
- Take care not to harass or bully residents or other councillors online.

If you choose to use social media, then remember that you are personally responsible for your social media account. The Council will not indemnify you against any penalties, convictions or other losses that you sustain as a result of your use of social media.

Tips for Councillors

Consider when use social media is appropriate as a form of communication. It does not, and should not replace your traditional work. Remember that not all residents will use social media.

Consider the best time to use (and not to use) social media – late on a Friday or Saturday night is unlikely to be the best time to engage with residents

Don't discuss specific casework online.

Keep your personal and councillor social media accounts separate. You should not use your personal account for councillor purposes, and you should not use your councillor account for private matters. Ensure that your councillor account is identified as such e.g. "Cllr F Bloggs"

Familiarise yourself with, and make appropriate use of, privacy settings on each social media platform that you use

And above all...

THINK before you type. A good rule of thumb is not to put post any message that you would not be happy to have read out in open court. Do not send messages when you are angry, upset, have been drinking alcohol, or any other situation in which your judgment might be compromised.