

Report of:	Charlotte Benjamin, Director of Legal and Governance Services
Submitted to:	Constitution and Members' Development Committee – 10 December 2021
Subject:	Social Media Framework: Policy and Guidelines for Elected Members

Summary

Proposed decision(s)
That Members approve the proposed Social Media Framework: Policy and Guidelines for Elected Members, for inclusion in the Members' Handbook.

Report for:	Key decision:	Confidential:	Is the report urgent?
Decision	No	No	No

Contribution to delivery of the 2021-24 Strategic Plan		
People	Place	Business
Ensure that communities are placed at the heart of what we do; work with communities in Middlesbrough to improve the lives of local people through effective communications.	Ensure that communications are undertaken in a way to enhance the reputation of Middlesbrough.	Ensure openness and transparency and support both the customer and digital strategies.

Ward(s) affected
N/A

What is the purpose of this report?

1. This report proposes the introduction of a new Social Media Framework (Policy and Guidelines) for Elected Members, for inclusion within the Members' Handbook.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. The Terms of Reference for the Constitution and Members' Development Committee include the development and the review of the Member Development Policy.
3. If approved, the framework will be applicable to all Elected Members and will be included within the Members' Handbook.

Report Background

4. Following concerns raised by some Members, an Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was convened to discuss how Members utilised social media as part of their communication activities.
5. The panel found that:
 - a) there were inconsistencies between how Members utilised social media, and
 - b) there was no overarching framework to provide guidance on how to utilise social media effectively and equitably.
6. Following the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel's investigation, the recommendations submitted to and endorsed by Executive on 7 September 2021 were as follows:
 1. *That a communications plan be implemented that aligns with the refreshed Strategic Plan 2021-2024 to ensure consistency and direction of council communications.*
 2. *To ensure Members are well versed on social media etiquette; a training package be delivered to Members on the appropriate use of social media. Training should be carried out as a mandatory requirement on an annual basis (minimum).*
 3. *That the principles of proper behaviour on social media be reflected in the revised Member Code of Conduct; and*
 4. *As a corollary of recommendations one and two; a framework be developed to provide clarity to all Members on the appropriate use of social media.*
7. In response to recommendation 4, this social media framework (incorporating policy and guidelines for Elected Members) has been produced.

What decision(s) are being asked for?

8. It is recommended that the Constitution and Members' Development Committee approve the proposed Social Media Framework: Policy and Guidelines for Elected Members, for inclusion in the Members' Handbook.

Why is this being recommended?

9. Communication is a critical function of everyday life and, increasingly, the ability to communicate effectively is held to a premium. The pitfalls of poor or malicious communication are well rehearsed and can have significant detrimental consequences; the ability to communicate effectively brings many advantages.

Options to be considered

10. Option 1

Approve the Social Media Framework; adopting this would provide a robust framework to govern the use of social media by Members. The framework will form part of the wider Standards regime.

Option 2

Do not approve the Social Media Framework.

11. For the reasons outlined in this report, Option 1 is recommended.

Conclusion

12. In conclusion, it is undeniable that we live in an information age where competing voices struggle to have their message heard. It is therefore critical that the Council takes appropriate action to ensure that its communications resonate with its residents.

13. Politically, there will always be a difference of opinion between Members and they should be free to avail themselves of media platforms to promote Middlesbrough where possible. However, a mechanism should be implemented that all Members are bound by, which ensures the quality and equity of the messages being transmitted.

14. Breaches of the Social Media Framework / Policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer to be dealt with under the Council's Standards Procedures. Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act, could lead to fines being issued and possible criminal or civil action being taken against the Council or the individual(s) involved.

15. The Members' Code of Conduct may require amendment as a result of the introduction of the Social Media Framework.

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

Legal

16. There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Financial

17. There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Policy Framework

18. The decision will not amend the Council's policy framework. The decision is aligned with the Mayor's priorities and the Strategic plan 2021 – 2024.

Equality and Diversity

19. This proposal does not raise any impacts for those individuals or groups with protected characteristics.

Risk

20. The key risk to the Council of not embracing the proposed framework is reputational damage as a consequence of inappropriate communications being transmitted.

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

21. If approved, the following actions will need to be undertaken:

- Inclusion of the framework within the Members' Handbook;
- Amendment to the Members' Code of Conduct; and
- Members to receive a briefing on the requirements and implications of the Social Media Framework.

Background papers

22. The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Body	Report Title	Date
Executive	Final Report of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel – Members' Communications – Service Response	7 September 2021

Contact: Sylvia Reynolds, Head of Democratic Services

Email: sylvia_reynolds@middlesbrough.gov.uk