



**Social Media Framework: Policy and Guidelines for
Elected Members**

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Social media is a form of electronic, interactive communication that enables users to create, publish and share content. Users are able to participate in social networking through the sharing of information, opinions, knowledge and interests. It is accessible 24/7 on a global platform.
- 1.2 From the perspective of Local Government, social media affords the opportunity to increase contact with residents and engage with 'hard to reach' groups. It provides an immediate and direct connection for increased interactivity with all stakeholders. Through enhanced openness and transparency, it helps build a sense of community by encouraging involvement in local democracy and decision making, which can help to increase resident satisfaction levels and ultimately improve service provision.
- 1.3 For the purpose of this policy, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, and any sites which may be developed subsequently to it. It also includes comments and discussion in respect of online newspaper articles and local media / news outputs.
- 1.4 Middlesbrough Council acknowledges the use of social media as an effective communications tool, but it should complement other official channels and not replace them. It must also be used effectively and sensibly so as to avoid reputational and credibility damage to the Council, present security risks, or breach the Data Protection Act.

PURPOSE

- 2.1 This policy applies to all Elected Members and relates to all social media use, irrespective of whether this be inside or outside of official capacities.
- 2.2 The following are examples of potential risks that Elected Members could face when using social media:
 - Damage to both the reputation of the Council and the respective Member;
 - Disclosure of confidential information / data breaches;
 - Breach of the Members' Code of Conduct through inappropriate use;
 - Safeguarding risks through the release of images or personal details;
 - Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation (for example: publishing or forwarding untrue statements about a person that is damaging to their reputation may result in defamation action, for which the user would be personally liable);
 - Bullying, harassment, intimidation or witch-hunting; and

- Social engineering or “phishing” attacks, virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sources.
- 2.3 In light of these potential risks, this policy has been created to provide guidance on the use of social media to ensure it remains lawful and effective, and does not compromise the Council’s information, computer systems / networks or stakeholders. Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly and responsibly and in line with Council policy.
- 2.4 This policy should be read in conjunction with the following:
- Data Protection Policy;
 - Middlesbrough Council Social Media Policy - this covers the use of social media sites by Council employees, Elected Members and by partners or third parties (including contractors) on behalf of the Council;
 - The Members’ Code of Conduct; and
 - The Members’ Handbook.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTED MEMBERS’ RESPONSIBILITIES

- 3.1 Elected Members are able to establish and utilise their own social media accounts. However, it is important to note that those doing so retain full personal responsibility for all published content.
- 3.2 The Members’ Code of Conduct and relevant legislation continues to apply online and when using social media. If making any reference to your role as an Elected Member, you may be perceived to be acting in your ‘official capacity’ and therefore any conduct may fall within the code.
- 3.3 Users must be confident, both in terms of a willingness to participate in social media as it does bring many advantages, but also confident in the nature of the information that is being published. Elected Members need to give careful consideration to the information being published as it is very difficult to retract and control once released into the public domain, and should also be aware that information can be taken out of context and ‘shared’ further. As a rule of thumb, users should ask themselves whether they would be confident in conveying the information face-to-face or in a public meeting setting. If not, do not publish it on online or on social media.
- 3.4 Stringent use of privacy settings will help prevent social media being accessed by the press or public, but there is no guarantee that posts or actions will remain totally private. Always read the terms of service for the social media site being utilised and ensure that privacy and access settings are fully agreeable before proceeding with sign-up.

- 3.5 In instances where Elected Members wish to separate their private lives from their official capacities, it is recommended that individual accounts or pages (in the case of Facebook, for example) be established. This will help prevent members of the public from accessing personal profile data.
- 3.6 In any biography, the account should state that the views are those of the respective Elected Member and may not represent the views of the Council.
- 3.7 The Council's logo or any other Council related material must only be used in an official capacity.
- 3.8 The Council will not promote Elected Members' social media accounts.

CONDUCT

- 4.1 Elected Members must treat others with courtesy and respect, avoid personal attacks and not make disrespectful, offensive or rude comments. Conduct must not differ from what is considered acceptable in the workplace. Consideration must be shown for others' views and privacy and published material must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and associated legislation; material must not be considered sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti-faith.
- 4.2 Social media must not be used to publish content which may result in action for defamation, discrimination, breaches of copyright, data protection or other claims for damages. This includes but is not limited to, material of an illegal, sexual or offensive nature that would bring the Council into disrepute.
- 4.3 Use of social media must not breach the Council's misconduct, equal opportunities or bullying and harassment policies.
- 4.4 Examples of good practice and 'hints and tips' are attached at the appendices section of this document.

SAFETY

- 5.1 When establishing accounts on social media sites, it is important to use a secure password. This should be more than eight characters and include a mixture of letters and numbers. Password information should never be released to anyone.
- 5.2 Elected Members must not disclose personal details of other individuals, such as home addresses and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's Data protection policy and use caution when sharing information.
- 5.3 Maintain awareness of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable. Any Elected Member receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use

of social media should report it directly to their political group leader, Democratic Services and / or the police.

- 5.4 For any concerns relating to such matters as safeguarding and crime and anti-social behaviour, avoid commenting or opening up dialogue online. Rather, report matters directly to the police or appropriate Council department (see useful contacts).

INFORMATION AND DATA PROTECTION

- 6.1 In respect of social media, Elected Members are governed by the Members' Code of Conduct and relevant legislation.
- 6.2 There should be no reference made to the Local Authority's residents without their prior written consent, for example: use of their image to promote initiatives in the ward.
- 6.3 Personal or sensitive information must be handled in line with the Council's data protection policies.
- 6.4 Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important that Elected Members are confident in the nature of the information being published / shared. N.B. With regards to sharing or 'liking' on Facebook or Instagram, or 'retweeting' on Twitter, if a Member does any of these things in relation to inappropriate content, it could be a breach of the code as it is still considered 'use' of social media.
- 6.5 Elected Members must not publish, share or report on meetings which are private or internal, or publish or share any exempt Committee reports or private papers.
- 6.6 Copyright laws continue to apply online. Elected Members must not use images to which they do not hold the copyright and any information shared should be attributed to the source.
- 6.7 The use of third party social media sites cannot be controlled by the Council. However, where complaints are received as to the appropriateness of social media posts, information will be gathered and retained by the Council in line with relevant procedures. This information will be held for the period of time necessary to complete any related investigation.

FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THIS POLICY

- 7.1 Breaches of this policy may result in a formal complaint being made to the Monitoring Officer to be dealt with under the Council's Standards Procedures. If you feel that Members are breaching this policy, this needs to be reported as a breach of the Members' Code of Contact to the Head of Democratic Services.

- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 The Council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct.

USEFUL CONTACTS

- 8.1 If you need any advice or further assistance with social media, please contact the following:
- Communications Team: marketing@middlesbrough.gov.uk
- 8.2 For Data Protection enquiries:
- Data Protection Officer: dataprotection@middlesbrough.gov.uk

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – LGA Digital Engagement for Elected Members (Good Practice Guidance)

Rules of engagement

Welcome to my page,
which aims to communicate
my activities as a councillor.

If you wish to be a part of this online community, you must agree to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

 **RULE 1**
Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, 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.

 If any of these rules are broken, page admins reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report content to the police if necessary.

 It may not be possible to respond to all queries on this page due to time constraints - if you have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.



For more information on the LGA's work on handling abuse on social media and digital citizenship visit: www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life

REF 43.4

Source: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/images/43.4%20Engagement_Cllr.png

Appendix 2 – Principles of Social Media Use (Good Practice Guidance)

- **Be professional** - remember that you are an ambassador for the Council - ensure your content is consistent with how you would be expected, as an Elected Member, to present yourself to colleagues, partners and users of Council services.
- **Be responsible** - be honest at all times and seek guidance when you are unclear as to the correct course of action. Do not act in a manner that would bring the Council into disrepute.
- **Be credible** - be accurate, fair and thorough and behave with full transparency.
- **Be current and timely** - make sure your content is up to date. Provide a good response to feedback in a timely manner.
- **Obey the law** - be aware that libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply.
- **Be safe** - never give out personal details like your home address or phone number.