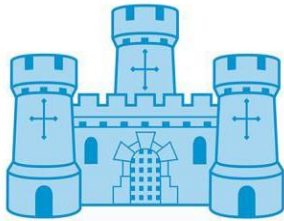


APPENDIX 18 (Annex 2)



NEWCASTLE·UNDER·LYME
BOROUGH COUNCIL

GUIDANCE FOR ELECTED MEMBERS ON PERSONAL USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING AND OTHER THIRD PARTY WEBSITES (INCLUDING BLOGS, MICROBLOGS AND PERSONAL WEB SPACE)

Introduction

The Internet provides a number of benefits in which Council elected members may wish to participate. From rediscovering old school friends on *Facebook* to keeping up with other people's daily lives on *Twitter* or helping to maintain open access online encyclopaedias such as *Wikipedia*.

However, when someone clearly identifies their association with the Council and/or discusses their work, as a Councillor they are expected to behave appropriately when on the Internet, and in ways that maintain confidentiality and are consistent with the Council's values and policies.

The guidance sets out the principles which Council officers as well as Members are expected to follow when using the Internet. It applies to blogs, to microblogs (e.g. *Twitter*), professional/political forums, professional/political/social networking sites and to other personal web-space. The Internet is a fast moving technology and it is impossible to cover all circumstances. However, the principles set out in this document should always be followed.

The intention of this note is not to stop elected Members from conducting legitimate activities on the Internet, but serves to flag-up those areas in which conflicts can arise.

1. Principles

The Council's reputation as a local authority is crucial. The public must be able to trust the integrity of our elected representatives. To this end, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council elected members:

- **Should not** engage in activities on the Internet which might bring the Council into disrepute;
- **Should** act in a transparent manner when putting information on-line that is related to their work as a councillor;

- **Should not** use the Internet in any way to attack or abuse colleagues, elected Members or the Council's partners;
- **Should not** post unreasonable, inappropriate, abusive, derogatory or offensive comments on the Internet that could be detrimental to their role as an elected representative of the Council.

2. Social Networking Sites

- 2.1** Social networking sites provide a great way for people to maintain contact with friends and colleagues. However, through the open nature of such sites, it is also possible for third parties to collate vast amounts of information.

All elected members should be mindful of the information they disclose on social networking sites. They should act in a manner which does not bring the council into disrepute or break the law (e.g. the Data Protection Act 1998).

2.2 Consideration towards other elected Members or members of staff when using social networking sites

Social networking sites allow photographs, videos and comments to be shared with thousands of other users. However, it will normally not be appropriate to share Council-related information in this way.

For example, there may be an expectation that photographs taken at a Council-related event will not appear publicly on the Internet, both from those present and perhaps those not at the event. Or the Council may have objections. Members should be considerate to their colleagues in such circumstances and should not post information when they have been asked not to. They should also remove information about a colleague if that colleague asks them to do so.

Under no circumstances should unreasonable, inappropriate, abusive, derogatory or offensive comments be made about Council staff, elected Members or colleagues from partner organisations on the Internet. This may amount to cyber-bullying or be damaging to the Council's relations with partners.

3. Blogging and microblogging

Many bloggers use their personal blogs, and increasingly their microblogs (such as *Twitter*), to discuss their work or role as a elected representative.

This guidance note is not intended to restrict this, as long as confidential information is not revealed, and no comments are made that could damage the Council's reputation or could be unreasonable, inappropriate, abusive, derogatory or offensive to staff and elected members or the council's partners. However, it is recommended that use of such sites should be proportionate and not excessive.

Blogs, microblogs or other personal websites which do not identify the blogger as a Council member, do not discuss the Council and are purely about personal matters would normally fall outside this guidance.

If a blog makes it clear that the author is an elected member of the Council, it should include a simple and visible disclaimer such as *“these are my personal views and they may not necessarily reflect the views of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council”*.

Personal blogs, microblogs and websites should never reveal confidential information about the Council. If in doubt about what might be confidential, Members should consult the Monitoring Officer.

Personal blogs, microblogs and websites should not be used to attack or abuse staff, other elected Members or employees of partner organisations and the privacy and the feelings of others should be respected. If an elected Member acts unlawfully on a blog or microblog, for example, by posting something defamatory, they will be held personally liable. Disclosure of data relating to an individual person would be a potential breach of the Data Protection Act.

If a Member thinks something on their blog, microblog or website gives rise to concerns about a conflict of interest, and in particular concerns about impartiality or confidentiality, this must be discussed with the Monitoring Officer.

Members should bear in mind concerns about confidentiality, conflicts of interest or commercial sensitivity.

A ‘quick guide’ is attached at Appendix A to this Annex.

Further information is available from the Local Government Association at www.local.gov.uk

Appendix A

BLOGGING QUICK GUIDE

Blogging and social networking are effective methods for councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors and politics.

As a Council Member, you should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you would when making statements in person or in writing.

You will also need to think about whether you are seen to be, or give the impression that you are acting in your official capacity as a Councillor. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct (the Code) and to ensure your use of online media is well received:

Do

- set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog;
- keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views;
- be aware that the higher your profile as a Councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network;
- ensure you use Council facilities appropriately; if you use a Council provided blog site or social networking area, any posts you make will be viewed as made in your official capacity;
- be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a Councillor, you will be seen as acting in your official capacity;
- make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.

Don't

- blog in haste;
- post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face;
- use Council facilities for personal or political blogs.

When the Code may apply

Bear in mind the Code when you blog or use social networking sites. You should pay particular attention to the following paragraphs of the Code:

- Disrespect
- Bullying
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Disrepute
- Misuse of authority resources

However, it is difficult to give definitive advice on the application of the Code as each blog and social networking page is different. The content of a blog or other social networking tool and the circumstances surrounding its creation will determine whether or not it might be covered by the Code.

Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. Members are encouraged to respect the **Seven General Principles of Public Life (see Annex 1 to Appendix 18)**. While your conduct may not be a breach of the Code, it may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for your office and authority.