

Thurrock Council - Social Media Guidelines for Councillors

1. Introduction

This policy aims to ensure appropriate use of social media by Councillors' and Co-opted Members. Users must ensure that they use social media sensibly, responsibly, lawfully, and that Council information remains secure and is not compromised. Also, that use will not expose the Council, its business to security risks, reputational damage, breach of Data Protection laws or legal claims.

This social media policy is to be read in conjunction with the Member code of Conduct.

2. Purpose

This Policy provides support and guidelines on how to use social media, how to effectively manage social media usage. It also provides guidance on some of the risks and pitfalls that specifically apply to Councillors and Co-opted Members and how to avoid these. This guidance is not exhaustive and if you have any queries, you should seek further guidance from the Monitoring Officer.

3. Responsibilities of Councillors and Co-opted Members

- You are personally responsible for any content that you publish on social media or allow to be published in the form of a comment. Your posts are in the public domain and are subject to both the Council's Member Code of Conduct and relevant Law.
- You will need to monitor and, where appropriate, censor or remove the contributions made by others to your site. Make sure you are confident of the validity and nature of the information you publish. Allowing defamatory, untrue, or offensive statements to remain on a site could give rise to a libel action for which you may be personally liable to pay damages, no indemnity from the Council will be available. Abusive, bullying, or racist posts may amount to a criminal offence. Also, Code of Conduct issues could arise where you allow comments to remain on your site, as this could be seen as condoning or endorsing them.
- Also 'liking,' 'sharing' or 're-tweeting' posts could appear to be an endorsement of them and can be a separate instance of publication by you, to which all the legal and Code of Conduct considerations would apply.
- Bear in mind that publishing information and images that are not yours, without permission, may also result in an award of damages against you. Seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.
- Always ensure the security of your devices to prevent unauthorised access by third parties who may make inappropriate use of the device.
- Make use of privacy settings if you do not want the press or public to access your social media platform. Read the terms of service of any social media site accessed and make sure you understand their confidentiality/privacy settings.

4. Principles for using social media

You should follow these guiding principles for any social media activities:

- Keep your posts professional, respectful, and polite – especially when corresponding with others who are discourteous, as you are still governed by the Code of Conduct and rules of confidentiality during online exchanges.
- Make sure that you respect people's confidentiality – do not disclose non-public information from Council meetings, discussions or documents or the personal information of others, including photographs, without their express permission to do so.

- Be credible and consistent – be accurate, fair, thorough, and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications.
- Be honest about who you are – it is important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. As you are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media, it is important to clarify between your professional and private life, possibly having separate accounts. It is recommended that you have separate social media profiles for your role as a Councillor or Co-opted Member and for your private life. Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council related material on a personal account or website.
- Do not enter unhelpful online arguments, as everyone online will be witnessing this. Ignore people or block them if they persist in vexatious comments.
- If you make a mistake - admit it. Mistakes happen so do not try to cover it up as there will always be a record of what you have said.
- Be responsive – share what you know and answer any questions in a in a timely manner. Put people in touch with someone who can help if you cannot.
- Think carefully about who to 'follow' or 'befriend' online. It is inadvisable unless you have good reason for doing so. Online 'friendships' with council officers should be avoided as they may compromise the appearance of impartial advice. Following or befriending contractors who have been procured to provide services to the council, a company or member of the public making a planning application or pressure groups, might be construed as having a close personal association with them and therefore a personal interest.

Bias and pre-determination

If you sit on regulatory committees such as planning or licensing, you can have a particular view on an application, but must not go as far as to have predetermined your position on a matter. Bear in mind that any relevant views you might have aired on social media about certain issues could be used as evidence of you making a decision in advance of hearing all relevant information. The Council's decision is then open to challenge and could be set aside. Also, provisions of the Code of Conduct for Members could be engaged.

Elections

You must not use social media on Council mobile devices or IT equipment, for political/campaign purposes.

Use of social media during Committee Meetings

It is important to consider that use of mobile devices at meetings may give the impression to others that you are not giving sufficient attention to discussions at committee meetings. Bear in mind that this could lead to the relevant decision coming under challenge if you are perceived to have to have made a decision without having properly listened to the debate. It could also result in Code of Conduct complaints.

5. Inappropriate Use of social media by Others

Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.

Anyone receiving threats, abuse, or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their group leader, the Monitoring Officer and /or the police. Other inappropriate content

can be reported to the social media site directly to ask for it to be removed. It is suggested that you that save a screenshot of any inappropriate post as evidence in the circumstances.

Safeguarding is everyone's business, if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.

Dated 30 May 2022