**Social Media Protocol for Members**

1. Purpose

Social Media is an incredibly useful tool which has changed the way many Councillors now engage

and communicate with the public. It allows you to open up new conversations with the people you

represent, understand and respond swiftly to local concerns, coordinate campaigns, assist with

casework and let your constituents know what you are doing as their local councillor, all at often a

fraction of the cost of more traditional means of communication.

However, there can also be pitfalls and to help minimise any risk this Protocol sets out some of the

points you should keep in mind whenever you use Social Media in your official role as a South

Ribble Councillor

2. What is Social Media?

This is a term used to describe websites and applications for social networking. Popular social

media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram and blogs. On

social media sites users share information, discuss opinions and build online communities and

networks.

You may already use social media in a private capacity. Consider if you want to create a separate

account for any “Councillor” related use. This Protocol and the Code of Conduct for Members both

only apply when you are acting in your official capacity as an Elected Member. However, you need

to be aware that it may not always be apparent to a member of the public in which capacity you are

commenting. This “blurred identity” may have implications if comments made in a private capacity

are taken to be those of the Council itself or your political party.

Online impressions count. Social Media can be a very powerful tool and how you portray yourself

online is very important. Consider carefully how you may appear to someone who doesn’t know

you personally – Is your online profile reflective of who you are and what you represent?

3. Social Media and the Code of Conduct for Members

Certain sections of the Code of Conduct for Members will apply to your online activity in just the

same way as they do to any other written or verbal communication. The key to whether the Code

applies is whether you are (or even just appear to be) acting in your capacity as a South Ribble

Councillor rather than as a private individual.

In all your dealings on Social Media you should take particular care not to publish anything which

might bring your role as a Councillor, or South Ribble Borough Council itself, into disrepute.

The main sections of the Code to consider are:

You should always treat others with respect – do not use social media to make personal

attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments.

You must comply with equality laws – take care that you do not publish anything which might be

considered to be sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti faith.

You must not bully or intimidate anyone – do not say anything that might be construed as

bullying or intimidation whether the comments relate to a council employee, a fellow Councillor or

anyone else.

You must not disclose confidential information – refrain from publishing anything you have

received in confidence.

4. General legal considerations

There are no new or additional legal burdens when using social media but you are publishing to

the web – it’s written down and it’s permanent so you need to bear the following in mind:

Libel – If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation

then they may take a libel action against you. This may also happen if someone else publishes

something libellous on your website which you know about and don’t take prompt action to remove.

A successful libel action can result in an award of damages against you.

Copyright – Publishing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (eg photos or

extracts from publications) without obtaining permission first is likely to breach copyright laws.

Breaching copyright laws can result in damages being awarded against you.

Data Protection – Take care not to publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their

specific permission.

Bias and Pre- determination – Whenever you are involved in making planning, licensing or other

quasi-judicial decisions do not say anything on social media which suggests that you have already

made up your mind before hearing all the evidence and arguments. Otherwise the decision may be

at risk of being challenged and declared invalid.

Obscene material – Obviously you should avoid publishing anything on social media which

anyone might consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

Harassment – it is a criminal offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against someone where

this is likely to cause alarm, harassment, nuisance or distress.

Electoral Periods - There are some additional duties around campaigning during elections. Full

guidance can be downloaded from the Electoral Commission website.

5. Use of Social Media During Council Meetings

Use mobile devices sparingly, discreetly and with common sense at meetings. Take care to avoid

extended periods of use which may give the impression that insufficient attention is being paid to

the business of the meeting.

Do not use social media during quasi-judicial meetings or during confidential or exempt items of

business.

Always ensure that devices are switched to silent during meetings and their use is not disturbing

others.

6. Staying Out of Trouble – some Do’s and Don’ts

Most pitfalls can be avoided if your online content is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Here are some tips to help you stay out of trouble:

Some Do’s

• Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site (especially if you have a

private non-political account)

• Consider keeping your personal and elected member profile on social networking sites

separate and maintain appropriate professional boundaries

• Look out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your site and remove them as soon

as possible to avoid any impression that you condone such comments

• Be careful about any connection with service users who are vulnerable adults or children as

this could be regarded as a safeguarding issue

• Ensure that you seek permission to post information from a copyrighted source or any

personal data

• Take care not to give the impression that you have already made up your mind before

hearing all the evidence and arguments if you are involved in any planning, licensing or other

quasi-judicial decision

• Keep posts positive as evidence suggests these are more popular and likely to generate

more support for your cause than negative or critical messages

• Set an example by engaging in healthy & respectful debate which will encourage others

(especially young people) to adopt similar online behaviours

Some Don’ts

• Post in haste, particularly if your judgement might be impaired (for example if you have

consumed alcohol)

• Post comments that you would not be prepared to make face to face

• Use Council facilities for personal or political blogs

• Use social media to attack, insult, abuse, defame or make negative or discriminatory

comments about anyone (including council staff, service users, or the Council itself)

• Publish confidential information which you have gained access to as a South Ribble

Councillor

• Represent your personal views, or those of any political party or specialist interest group you

belong to, as being those of the Council

• Distribute any material which could be considered inappropriate, offensive, illegal or

discriminatory

• Robust political debate with other politicians is fine from time to time but do not let it

degenerate into personal attacks

• Forget to consider your wider audience, online posts may be read by younger people who

could be distressed at messages which had been intended for their parents or close relatives

• Make excessive use of social media technology during Council or Committee meetings as

this may give the impression you are not engaged in the business of the meeting

7. Finally…

Although you need to be aware of the potential risks most Councillors using Social Media engage

with the public in an entirely constructive way without ever running foul of either the Code of

Conduct or the Law.

Use your common sense, relax and enjoy.