

Protocol

Social media refers to any kind of internet based tool that you can use for sharing information and ideas, networking or finding people with similar interests; including (but not limited to): blogs, micro-blogging, photo sharing, video sharing, social networks, mobile phone applications, texting, digital TV services, wikis, gaming and collaboration tools.

Examples of Social Media tools are Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Stumbleupon, LinkedIn, YouTube as well as blogs, forums and wikis.

Social media can be a great way for councillors to connect and communicate with residents, and can be used to;

- Support Councillors' community leadership role,
- Create or take part in conversations,
- Keep in touch with local views,
- Campaign on local issues

The use of social media has the following legal implications;

- Libel – publishing an untrue statement about an individual which would damage their reputation;
- Copyright or Confidential material – publishing images or text from a copyrighted source or confidential material without permission
- Data protection – publishing personal data of individuals without their written permission.

In each case legal action could result in civil proceedings being issued against a councillor which may in turn result in an award of damages and the payment of legal costs by the individual councillor.

Lancashire County Council does not provide social media accounts for councillors. Training on the use of social media is available from Member Development. Contact Catherine Earnshaw on 01772 533306 or councillors should refer to the LGA's Connecting Councillors – A social media handbook.

Councillors can use social media tools and may refer to their position as a county councillor, but must make clear that the activity, comments and views are those of the councillor and are not conducted in any official county council capacity. It is best practice to include a disclaimer, such as the "The views I express here are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lancashire County Council".

When using social media, councillors should have due regard for the Councillor's Code of Conduct, paying particular attention to the following general obligations;

- Treating others with respect,
- Not disclosing confidential information,
- Not bringing the council or your office into disrepute,
- Not improperly securing an advantage,

- Complying with council's rules about use of resources

Complaints made under the Code may result in a councillor being referred to the Conduct Committee and in some circumstances may also form the basis for legal action to be taken against a councillor.

Councillors should not comment or post on official Lancashire County Council social media channels in a way that would cause political, including party political, comments to appear on County Council social media sites.

Councillors may use county council systems to access social media when that activity contributes to the discharge of the functions of the council or to the office to which the councillor has been appointed by the council. Examples of acceptable use from county council systems include;

- Accessing sites to monitor or determine public opinion
- Posting of non-political message, such as details of an activity undertaken as a county councillor
- Support for county council messages and campaigns on other social media channels

Councillors must not install any software required by social media channels on LCC equipment.

Advice and guidance

Councillors should be aware that, as public figures, their social media accounts may be closely monitored by members of the public.

Councillors should exercise extra care in any posts, noting that:

- Some social media sites place restrictions on the length of a post or entry, and this tends to favour simplistic statements at the expense of balanced and nuanced arguments.
- Social media is the home of "trolls" who try to provoke reactions in others. Councillors should be aware of this and not respond to provocation. In general, you can never "win" an argument on social media, so it is not usually worth trying
- 'Posts' can cause others to take offence e.g. jokes can be misunderstood, 'banter' can be perceived as bullying, irony can be misread. Offence can easily be taken, even where none is intended.
- Once posted in a public arena, your views are no longer your own, and you should be aware of the possibility of being selectively quoted, or your comments being taken out of context.
- The use of #hashtags, retweets prevent any control of what is published by others.
- Whilst part of the point of social media is to allow real time reactions and dialogue, great care should be taken in posting a hasty response to a statement or news event. Developing events may prove your initial response

to be inappropriate or incorrect, or you may in your haste not have used the most appropriate words to express your view.

- Consider writing out posts or entries in a word document, waiting, and then re-reading them before you post online.
- Use of social media may also compromise your personal and private data.

Councillors should be mindful of whether their social media profile gives the impression that they are acting in their "official capacity". Councillors should therefore;

- Set appropriate privacy settings.
- Not use their LCC email account when registering a social media account.
- Keep personal and political social media profiles separate. You may even want to consider having separate profiles for your personal life, your work as a councillor, and your political activities.
- Monitor 'posts' from others on your social media accounts, removing defamatory or obscene posts as soon as possible.
- Be mindful of publishing information that you would only have access to as a county councillor.
- Not publish anything, which might be seen to pre-determine any future decision, such as Development Control matters.
- Not request or accept LCC council employees as a "friend" on social networking sites.
- Think about what and how you 'post' on social media, would you be comfortable to make this statement in person or in writing?