

GWYNEDD COUNCIL

PROTOCOL ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY COUNCILLORS

INTRODUCTION

1. The “Social Media” are changing the way in which people communicate and network. This change offers a new platform for engagement, communication and listening. As a result, it is natural that this change affects the way in which the Council contacts the county’s citizens and also the way in which councillors operate.
2. The purpose of this policy document is to provide guidance for councillors in the use of this media.

THE ADVANTAGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3. The development of “Social Media” offers opportunities for sharing information with and seeking responses from residents. The various means (Facebook, Twitter, Blogs etc) offer a quick, cheap and effective way of doing so. They also are a means to enable contact with those who would, perhaps, have had no previous link with democratic processes.
4. As a result, they are media that can prove very useful to the Council corporately and also to local councillors. Used well, councillors can benefit greatly and the Council encourages appropriate use by councillors. However, it is important to be aware of the dangers and risks associated with their use.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

5. The fundamental principle is that “The Gwynedd Standard” (see Appendix 1) and the Code of Conduct for Councillors (see Appendix 2) are relevant to all activities, including the use of Social Media. Consequently, the conduct of members when using social media must adhere to the same standards as conduct by a member at a committee, a public meeting or in correspondence.
6. Therefore, in addition to the general legal duties, the following principles should be borne in mind:-
 - Showing respect to others
 - Not revealing exempt or confidential information
 - No bullying or threatening of others
 - Not seeking personal benefit
 - Remembering the principles of equality
 - Being careful not to decide matters in advance

THE RESONSIBILITY FOR “CONTENT”

7. One big difference between the social media and other media is that the owner of the “site” is responsible not only for their own statements but also the statements made by others on that site. Consequently, if inappropriate statements are made, the owner of the “site” is responsible for withdrawing those statements.

“POLITICAL” DISCUSSIONS

8. Local “political” discussions can be robust and challenging. Whilst the Public Services Ombudsman has accepted that members must have a “thicker skin” since criticism of ideas and opinion is part of democratic debate, the “Gwynedd Standard” does make it clear that no-one should be offensive or abusive even in those “political” discussions. This protocol confirms that those standards are relevant to members in their use of social media.

THE COUNCILLOR AS AN INDIVIDUAL

9. A councillor can establish a site in their own name or as “Councillor ****”
Members should be aware that this protocol is relevant to either scenario. Since it is clear that the fact that an individual is an elected member is public information, a member should be equally careful on one as the other. The relevance of the policy to matters depends on the content and the conduct standards are constant throughout.

THE USE OF COUNCIL EQUIPMENT

10. The councillor may use the Council’s equipment for publishing information on social media but members should be wary of the content.

USE AT MEETINGS

11. Social media may be used at the meetings of the Council and its committees. However, it must be borne in mind that:-
 - A member’s main focus should be on the discussion in hand and the decision to be made
 - Exempt and confidential information should not be tweeted
 - The details of meetings should not be tweeted

WEB-CASTING

13. The Council will be moving in due course to broadcast some of its meetings (full Council and some committees) over the Web. As a part of that development, we will be encouraging the use of social media for members of the public to respond to discussions. However, that will take place through the Council’s official “sites”. The individual use of media by elected members falls under paragraph 11 of this protocol.

TRAINING

14. Training on this protocol will be provided for members in order to empower them to make responsible and appropriate use of the media but emphasising the individual responsibility of the individual member of them.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

15. Any complaints relating to the protocol should be sent to the Propriety Officer.

APPENDIX 1 – THE GWYNEDD STANDARD

APPENDIX 2 – CODE OF CONDUCT

APPENDIX 3 – WELSH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION GUIDELINES

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