

GWYNEDD COUNCIL

PROTOCOL ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY COUNCILLORS

INTRODUCTION

1. Social Media is an important means of communication in society today and is 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 Council welcomes members' increasing use of social media and wishes to facilitate this by giving proper advice and support. The Council's Democratic Services and Standards Committees have recognised the need for guidance on what is and is not acceptable. This protocol is intended to provide such guidance and complements the general rules under the Code of Conduct for Elected Members. Obviously, the basic position is that the same standards of conduct apply whether a member is on-line or not.

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

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. Social Media puts users at the leading edge of breaking news. 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 provide a media that can prove very useful to the Council corporately and also to local councillors. By proper use of Social Media, 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. Misuse of these media can lead to significant legal difficulties and the Attorney General has issued guidance seeking to avoid that. (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/attorney-general-to-warn-facebook-and-twitter-users-about-contempt-of-court>)

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 of conduct as they would observe 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, harassment, victimisation or threatening of fellow councillors officers or members of the public
 - Not seeking personal benefit
 - Remembering the principles of equality
 - Being careful not to decide matters in advance
 - Being careful not be seen as a party to incitement or a vendetta against others

THE RESPONSIBILITY 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.
8. In addition, once something is posted on a social media site, it is in the public domain. The Council will, as required, ask members to remove any content in violation of this protocol and failure to do so will be in contravention of the protocol. However, members must be aware that, once in the public domain, it is difficult to withdraw an entry, whether that be of fact or opinion, and that could lead, in the end, to legal action.

“POLITICAL” DISCUSSIONS

9. 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

10. 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 out in the public domain, a member should be equally careful in any social media scenario. The extent to which this protocol is applied depends on the subject matter but the standards of conduct are the same.

THE USE OF COUNCIL EQUIPMENT

11. The councillor may use the Council's equipment for publishing information on social media but members should be even more wary of the content.

USE AT MEETINGS

12. 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 12 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. There is a clear expectation that members will take advantage of such training. However, it is clear that the responsibility for conformance with the protocol rests with the individual member.

DISCIPLINE AND DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

15. Any complaints relating to the protocol should be sent to the Propriety Officer. The Standards Committee will deal with any issue of discipline arising from any reported transgression of this protocol according to its normal arrangements on member conduct submitting recommendations to the Council as required.

APPENDIX 1 – THE GWYNEDD STANDARD

APPENDIX 2 – CODE OF CONDUCT

APPENDIX 3 – WELSH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION GUIDELINES