Bridgend County Borough Council
Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Pen-y-bont ar Ogwr

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PROTOCOL FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

BY ELECTED MEMBERS

Date of Issue: XXXXX 2013

1. **Introduction**

   Social media is the term given to online media/websites that are based on user-generated content and participation. Social media can fall under the following categories: blogs, forums, podcasts, wikis, networks and other online communities.

   Social media, if used correctly can allow you to develop two-way, real-time communications with residents, the general public and your networks. It can also allow you to keep up-to-date with local news/issues and to open new conversations with people who you might not normally be able to reach.

   This social media protocol has been developed in line with the council's ICT protocols and the ICT Code of Practice which is applicable to all elected members.

   All elected members using social media will need to conduct themselves in line with Members Code of Conduct.

   While the council respects the privacy and legal rights of elected members, any actions that form part of their role as a councillor may impact on the council's interests or reputation therefore this has also been considered as part of this protocol.

2. **Before you start using social media**

   If you wish to use council equipment and networks:

   Before you set up your social media account using your BCBC ICT facilities you will need to ensure that you have

   1. signed the ICT Code of Practice;

   2. completed suitable training for using social media effectively and safely. Training will be co-ordinated by the Head of Democratic Services;

   3. requested access from ICT to the specific social media accounts you would like to use.

   Note:

   Most requests will be accepted for mainstream Social Networking sites, although ICT may deny a request if the site is deemed a security risk to the BCBC Corporate Network.

   Even if you are not planning on using council equipment or networks to access social media, it is still advisable for you to undertake basic training on using social media effectively as a communications tool.

3. **Setting up your social media account(s)**

   Once you have undertaken your training you will need to decide which social media account you would like to set up.

It's advisable to only set up a single account to start with, possibly even a trial account while you get used to using it. When creating your profile, you will need to bear in mind that by being a councillor (whether you use your full title or not on your profile) you are declaring yourself a representative and you must act in accordance with the Members Code of Conduct. The image you project could not only have a negative impact on yourself, it could also impact on the council and its reputation.

To manage expectations you should be clear in your profile whether this account will be in your official capacity as a councillor or a personal account. It is recommended that a combined (official and personal) account should not be used as this may be confusing to those viewing your social media activities. You should use a disclaimer to make it clear you are not speaking on behalf of the council, e.g. 'Views expressed on this social media site are my own and not that of the council.' This should then be displayed clearly on your profile.

You are permitted to use your BCBC email address on your profile. You will also be able to have links from your BCBC web profile to your social media accounts if you require this.

4. **Using social media effectively and safely**
   If managed properly, social media can provide a highly effective opportunity for councillors to engage in conversations, share information and news on a local, national and even global scale.

   - **Managing the account effectively**

     It's not enough to simply set an account up, you will need to regularly update, monitor and engage with people for it to be effective. Remember, even though you might only use social media during office hours other users will access and generate content 24 hours a day so you will need to allocate time regularly to check. You might wish to state how often you plan to check your page and when you might not be available, e.g. at busy times, during working hours and give alternative ways for you to be contacted. You should ensure you put sufficient measures in place to respond to queries in a timely and accurate manner. If you don't respond, followers will think you are inactive or unresponsive. It is advised you only set up accounts that you know you can reasonably manage.

   - **Style and etiquette**

     o Social media lends itself to a less formal communication style. Ensure you are clear, professional yet informal in your tone. You should follow plain English guidelines and avoid 'local government speak'.

     o You should communicate through social media in the language of your choice. However, if someone contacts you in Welsh you should make every effort to respond to that person through the medium of Welsh using a Welsh translator.

     o Avoid being flippant or sarcastic.

     o If you post something in error and choose to delete it, consider whether you may need to clarify this and why you've done so.

- **Dealing with difficult posts and complaints**

    o Consider how you will deal with difficult and challenging queries. Try to deal with these publically in a professional, factual and transparent manner. The purpose of social media is to encourage two-way conversations, part of this will include responding to difficult queries. Remember people are entitled to their own views. You may encounter persistent complainants who use social media to highlight what they feel is a personal issue or injustice and you will need an effective strategy for dealing with this e.g. you may tell someone you will contact them in person instead and offer ways of doing this.

    o Deal with offensive comments quickly and sensitively. If an offensive, threatening or libellous comment is posted then you have the right to remove it (if possible) or ask for it to be removed by the person who posted it, however do give an explanation as to why you have taken this action. You may need to block persistent vexatious complainers but this should be a last resort and after they have been asked not to persist

    o You may come across inaccurate or incorrect content other people have generated about the council or you. Don't be defensive in reacting to this. If information is inaccurate or incorrect you may politely and sensitively clarify the situation. You should inform the Communications team of information posted that could damage the reputation of the council or lead to media interest so they can understand and advise on this. Avoid entering into public arguments online.

    o If you feel that your efforts to manage any difficult tweets or complaints hasn't worked then contact your group leader or the Communications team for advice.

- **Keeping you and others safe**

    o Users must be aware of, and abide by the ICT Code of Practice.

    o Whenever you post something on social media, it becomes a statement in the public domain and is subject to the Members Code of Conduct.

    o Through social media you are potentially connected to other councillors, council staff and residents, as well as the rest of the world. Make sure the image you project is consistent with your position as a councillor.

    o Think before you post something on social media. Don't post views or opinions that you would not be prepared to discuss face to face with someone, defend publically or that you would be prepared to have minuted in a meeting.

    o Be careful when choosing to share information posted by other users including individuals and organisations. Always be mindful of endorsing someone else's activity.

- o Protect your passwords and don't reveal them to anyone else. If you suspect that your social media account has been hacked, please report this to ICT for advice on how to manage this.

- o Laws such as libel, defamation, copyright and data protection all apply online. For the council's protection, as well as your own, it's imperative that you are fully aware of these policies and conduct your behaviour appropriately.

- o Be aware that all information that you publish on the Internet is viewable to a global audience and has the potential to always be viewable/searchable online. Content on social media sites may also be subject to Freedom of Information requests.

- o Exercise caution when using social media applications (such as widgets) as some require you to allow access to your account. These applications often have a disclaimer that states they can access your account and post on your behalf – this often manifests in auto-updates when using the applications and can often be misconstrued as advertising. It is advised you refrain from using these.

- o Be wary about direct messages such as 'Hi, have you seen this photo of you on twitter?' even if they come from someone you know. Delete before opening, so that the spam message is not sent on to your contacts.

- o If a member of the press or media contacts you with a query about the council or council services, speak with the Communications team.

- **Using social media during council meetings**

  You will not be allowed to access your social media accounts as part of council meetings. It is expected that you will be fully engaged within debate and the meeting agenda. This will also ensure that communication with the public or individuals cannot be perceived to influence the outcomes of any decisions taken as part of the meetings.

- **Using social media for political comment and electioneering**

  You are able to make political comments on your social media provided it falls in line with the Members Code of Conduct. However you are not permitted to use council equipment or networks for electioneering purposes.

5. **Sanctions**

   Where it is believed that an elected member has failed to comply with this protocol, action may be considered under the Members Code of Conduct.

6. **Agreement**

   All elected members who have been granted the right to use the council's internet access are required to accept this protocol.