

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT TO DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

23 JANUARY 2014

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE LEGAL AND REGULATORY SERVICES

SOCIAL MEDIA PROTOCOL - UPDATE

1. Purpose of Report.

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to request that the Democratic Services Committee reviews the Social Media Protocol for Elected Members and endorse the revision of the Protocol for submission to Council.

2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Objectives/Other Corporate Priorities

- 2.1 Elected Members have a wide range of roles and responsibilities that they are expected to undertake. The Protocol provides an opportunity for each ward member to engage with their community and to progress the improvement objectives of the Authority.

3. Background.

- 3.1 Council approved the adoption of the draft Protocol on 16 October 2013. It was also agreed that the Democratic Services Committee would undertake a review of the Protocol and make any amendments necessary.
- 3.2 Since the introduction of the Protocol, three Elected Members have expressed an interest in utilising opportunities offered by the use of the Social Media Protocol. Work has been ongoing to provide additional social media training for Elected Members with an offer of attending a session provided by the WLGA in Neath Port Talbot on 12 February 2014.

4. Current situation / proposal.

- 4.1 Amendments to the Protocol have been suggested by Elected Members. These proposals included:
- Defining the purpose of the Protocol;
 - Establishing how reviews of the Protocol would be undertaken;
 - Clarifying how training would be provided;
 - Clarifying the support mechanisms available;
 - The inclusion of the legal definitions within the Protocol;
 - Changes to the format to enhance professionalism.
- 4.2 These proposals have been considered by the Head of Democratic Services and the Marketing and Engagement Manager. The suggested amendments are identified in red in Appendix 1.

- 4.3 It has been determined that the Protocol will be available electronically on the Members Zone as a reference document. This will allow the use of hyperlinks to provide direct access to related information from other policies and legislation. This is considered as a preferred option rather than increasing the content and complexity of the Protocol which could potentially make it less easy to read and understand. This will also negate the need to update the Protocol when the associated policies and protocols are amended.
- 4.4 Members will also be provided with access to the data protection e-learning module that has recently been developed by Legal & Regulatory Services. The presentation and notes from the social media training provided by the WLGA will also be made available on the Members Zone as a source of reference following attendance at the training events.
- 4.5 The Democratic Services Committee is requested to consider the proposals to amend the Protocol and make any additional amendments that they determine are appropriate.
- 5. Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules.**
- 5.1 There is no change the Policy Framework and procedure rules.
- 6. Equality Impact Assessment**
- 6.1 There are no equalities implications in respect of this report.
- 7. Financial Implications.**
- 7.1 All activities described in this report will be met from existing budget provision
- 8. Recommendation.**
- 8.1 The Democratic Services Committee is requested to consider the proposals for the amendment of the Social Media Protocol for Elected Members and make any additional amendments that they determine are appropriate;
- 8.2 Endorse the revision of the Protocol as determined in para 8.1. for submission to Council for approval and adoption.

P A Jolley
ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE – LEGAL & REGULATORY SERVICES
28 October 2013

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Background documents: None

PROTOCOL FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

BY ELECTED MEMBERS

1. Purpose

Bridgend County Borough Council approved the implementation of this protocol which provides an opportunity for elected members to develop or increase their use of social media. The Democratic Services Committee will review the protocol on a regular basis and consider potential issues that the use of social media presents. The committee will also identify any advice and support required by elected members to ensure the effective and appropriate use of social media.

2. 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.

Over the past few years it has become one of the most important means of communications for individuals and businesses.

Social media, if used correctly can allow elected members to develop two-way, real-time communications with residents, the general public and networks. It can also allow elected members to keep up-to-date with local news/issues and to open new conversations with people who elected members 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 \(6 simple rules\)](#) which is applicable to all elected members.

All elected members using social media will need to conduct themselves in line with the [Members Code of Conduct](#).

Whilst 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.

3. Before elected members start using social media

If elected members 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 \(6 simple rules\)](#)
2. completed suitable training for using social media effectively and safely. Training will be co-ordinated by the [Head of Democratic Services](#) either as part of the induction of new members, if identified during the PDR process or by the Democratic Services Committee, and when significant changes are made to the protocol.
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.

4. 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.

5. 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**

- 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'.
- You should communicate through social media in the language of your choice. However, if a social media account you are operating in an official capacity receives a query in a language in which you are not fluent, you may request that the individual redirects this to your @bridgend.gov.uk email address. This will enable the query to be dealt with by the authority in the individual's language using an approved translator.
- Avoid being flippant or sarcastic.
- 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**

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 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.
- 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.

- If a member of the press or media contacts you with a query about the council or council services, speak with the Communications team.
- **Keeping you and others safe**
 - Users must be aware of, and abide by the [ICT Code of Practice \(6 simple rules\)](#).
 - Whenever you post something on social media, it becomes a statement in the public domain and is subject to the [Members Code of Conduct](#).
 - 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.
 - 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 not be prepared to have minuted in a meeting.
 - Be careful when choosing to share information posted by other users including individuals and organisations. Always be mindful of endorsing someone else's activity.
 - 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.
 - Laws such as libel, defamation, copyright and data protection all apply online. For the council's protection, as well as your own, it is imperative that you are fully aware of these policies and conduct your behaviour appropriately. **The social media training should provide an understanding of these issues and the presentation will be updated on the Members Zone as a reference document. Elected members will also be signposted to the data protection e-learning module that is accessible from the Members Zone. Links to other relevant policies will also be added to the Members Zone.**
 - 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.
 - 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.

- 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.

- **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.

6. Support

The following support is available to assist in the use of social media:

- The Head of Democratic Services will co-ordinate suitable training and provide advice in order to meet the requirements of the protocol;
- The ICT department will provide and maintain access to requested social media sites as necessary. You should also report if you suspect your account has been hacked to ICT so they can provide advice on this matter;
- The Monitoring Officer will provide legal advice relating to social media and to clarify any Members Code of Conduct issues that may arise;
- The Communications team can provide assistance in relation to dealing with difficult posts or complaints in line with this section of the protocol. You should contact the Communications team for advice if you feel that any activity could potentially damage the council’s reputation or lead to media interest. If you are contacted by the media to comment on the council or council services, you should contact the Communications team for advice before responding.

7. 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](#).

8. Agreement

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

Name: Councillor Date: _____

Signature: _____