

## Social media guidance for members



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Councillors are increasingly using social media as a means of communicating with local residents and expressing views. Used appropriately, it can be a very effective way to discuss matters online. However, it also has significant risks, and there have been lots of examples in recent months and years where local and national politicians have made inappropriate comments that have resulted in bad publicity and, in some cases, disciplinary action.



Nick Harrington  
@nickjharrington



Cllr Nick Harrington was suspended from his council and party duties in May 2017 after posting this tweet during the Eurovision Song Contest.

#Eurovision2017 thanks Ireland. You can keep your f'king gypsies! Hard border coming folks!

14/05/2017, 00:16

Councillors should take due regard of internet security and ensure that communications remain proper and appropriate. The following practical points may assist.

### Make your commenting clear

If you are a councillor your social media profiles should never say 'Views are my own', 'Personal views', 'Retweets don't indicate an indorsement' or anything similar. The fact that you hold public office means that your views will be interpreted by people as representing the views of your position and party. Including this disclaimer doesn't protect you or make people less likely to think this. It can also be dangerous as it can provide you with a false sense of security.

It is worth pointing out that councillors can have blurred identities when they have a social media account where they comment both as a councillor and as a private individual. It may be clear in your mind when you are posting in a private capacity or as a councillor, but it will be less clear to members of the public.

One way to separate your personal/private business from your activities as a councillor is to have two separate accounts – one for personal/private business and the other for council business.

However, once a councillor is elected, he/she must accept that the position is a position of responsibility and you should accede to the Code of Conduct and any related policies. Anything posted on social media becomes council business. Any views which could be perceived as bringing North Somerset Council into disrepute must not be posted on either your councillor profile or your personal profile.

## Think before you publish

Words cannot be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off blog, post or tweet, it will probably already have been read and will be referenced or duplicated in places on the web beyond your reach. If you include photographs or other images, you may need to consider whether anyone shown in these may reasonably object.

If however, you do make a mistake, it is better to admit this rather than trying to cover it up. Amending the text and acknowledging your mistake – perhaps by putting a line through the offending words and inserting a correction, or providing an update section at the bottom of a blog post – shows you are not pretending it never happened, and it is better than deleting it when dealing with inline misfires.

## Legal considerations

In the main, councillors have the same legal duties online as anyone else, but failures to comply with the law may have more serious consequences. The following should be considered carefully:

### Libel

If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take action against you. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something libellous on your website if you know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it.

### Bullying and discriminatory comments

Behaving in a discriminatory, bullying or harassing way towards any individual including making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality), disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief via social media by posting images, links or comments could, in certain circumstances, result in criminal sanction.

### Obscene material

It goes without saying that nothing should be published that could be considered obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

### Data protection

Avoid publishing/posting the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission.

### Copyright

Placing images or text on a site/profile from a copyrighted source without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against you.

### Bias and pre-determination

If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications or other quasi-judicial decisions, avoid publishing anything that might suggest that you do not have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.

### Electoral periods

The Electoral Commission requires that candidates provide a return of expenditure on any form of advertising or campaign literature and that includes web advertising. There are additional requirements, such as imprint standards, for materials which can be downloaded from a website. Full guidance for candidates can be found at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

### Interaction with followers/friends/readers

Some of the terminology in social media, like 'following' or 'friending' can imply an intimacy that not really there. Both terms just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information. Experienced internet users are used to this, but some members of the public may feel uneasy when their councillor begins following them on Twitter before establishing some sort of online relationship.

Think carefully about who you request to be 'friends' with or accept 'friend' requests from. Requesting or accepting for example an officer of the council as a 'friend' on a social network site must not compromise the professional and impartial relationship between officers and councillors. Generally this should be avoided.

You will need to make note of comments that other people make. It may be a fine line to tread but if you allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand, it can put off other members of your community and you may be called to account. For social networks where people can post public or semi-public messages to your profile, you will need to check regularly on messages or disable message posting. For blogs, the easiest way is to moderate comments and state clearly that you are doing so and reasons why comments may be rejected.

Some comments may not agree with your views, but deleting the comments of people who disagree with you will backfire. You cannot stop them from posting the same comment elsewhere, then linking back to your site and saying that you are gagging those who disagree with you.

You will find some argumentative characters out there. Don't get bogged down. You don't have to respond to everything. Ignore if necessary.