



BANGOR CITY COUNCIL

PROTOCOL ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA **BY COUNCILLORS**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 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 City's population and also the way in which Councillors operate.
- 1.2 The City Council welcomes Members' increasing use of social media and wishes to facilitate this by giving proper advice and support. Gwynedd Council has already recently adopted guidance on what is and what is not acceptable and it is considered appropriate for the City Council to follow this lead and adopt a similar protocol. This protocol therefore provides 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.

2.0 THE OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

- 2.1 The development of Social Media offers opportunities for sharing information with and seeking responses from electors. 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.
- 2.2 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-warnfacebook-and-twitter-users-about-contempt-of-court>).

3.0 FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

- 3.1 The fundamental principle is that the Code of Conduct for Councillors, the Council's Standing Orders and Press and Media Policy (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.
- 3.2 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
 - Not to decide matters in advance
 - No incitement of conduct contrary to this protocol by others
 - Not being a party to a personal vendetta against others

4.0 THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR “CONTENT”

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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.

5.0 “POLITICAL” DISCUSSIONS

- 5.1 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 Code of Conduct does make it clear that Members must show respect and consideration for others and no-one should be offensive or abusive. This protocol confirms that those standards are relevant to Members in their use of social media.

6.0 THE COUNCILLOR AS AN INDIVIDUAL

- 6.1 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.

7.0 USE AT MEETINGS

7.1 The Council's Standing Orders makes it clear that, despite the restriction on photographing, recording, broadcasting or transmitting the proceedings of a meeting by any means set out in the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, if the Council gives its prior written consent this will be allowed. However, Councillors should consider carefully whether it is appropriate for them to use social media at meetings of the Council and its committees as it must be borne in mind that:-

- a Member's main focus at such meetings should be on the discussion in hand and the decision to be made;
- perception by the public that Member is being distracted from his/her responsibilities at the meeting by tweeting;
- exempt and confidential information should not be tweeted;
- the details of meetings should not be tweeted.

8.0 DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS ABOUT BREACHES OF THE PROTOCOL

8.1 Any complaints relating to the protocol should be sent to the Council's Proper Officer. Serious or repeated breaches of the Protocol will be referred to the Monitoring Officer and if it is considered appropriate, to the Gwynedd Standards Committee for action.

Gwyn Hughes
Town Clerk

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