Delamere and Oakmere Parish Council Social Media Policy

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Confirmed 6th May 2021
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The use of Social Media by Parish Councillors

Social networking: an effective medium of communication but not without risk
When it comes to reaching certain groups quickly, cheaply and maintaining control over your message, many councillors find online methods hard to beat.

This Guidance looks at how councillors can use social networking effectively and ethically to engage with their local communities. As a reminder The Localism Act 2011 placed a general obligation to *"promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority "*

•   If you use blogs, Facebook or Twitter to help you to carry out your political work, rather than in your private capacity, your obligation to meet certain standards of conduct still applies. You can still be involved in robust political debate and state your opinions strongly – the Code does not exist to gag you or fellow councillors or stop you expressing political views. It does, however, prohibit treating others with disrespect, bullying and bringing one's office or authority into disrepute. It is important if you are blogging or tweeting personally and not in your role as councillor, that you do not act, claim to act, or give the impression that you are acting as a representative of your Authority. It is worth noting that web links to official council websites may give or reinforce the impression that you are representing the council.

•   It is worth considering that while the immediacy of social media can be a great benefit, it also has a downside. For example, it is possible for you to Tweet on a matter seconds after leaving a meeting – long before your opponents have issued press statements. This can result in broadcasting spontaneous remarks that may quickly seem unwise. By the time you have reconsidered and deleted them, they may have been seen by thousands, Facebook-shared, re-Tweeted, linked to, and committed to local headlines. That is fine, if you have got this message across just how you wanted to; less so if your post was an outburst in the heat of the moment. Such remarks are easily withdrawn, apologised for and forgotten when made in person, but posting them on the internet means that they have been published, and in a way that cannot be contained.

•   It is important to note that good ethical standards are not limited to the Code of Conduct. While you may not be investigated for using online media, your conduct can still attract adverse publicity, even where the Code does not apply. For example, a regional newspaper recently called a councillor's blog post against a rival party a "toilet-mouthed tirade" saying:
"A [Code] breach it may not have been; childish, crude and demeaning to all who vote or follow politics it certainly was."
It is clear that social networking sites can enhance political debate and add positively to local politics when used correctly.

Blogging Quick Guide for Councillors

Blogging and social networking are effective methods for councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors and politics.

You should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you would when making statements in person or in writing,

You will also need to think about whether you are acting as a councillor, or giving the impression that you are representing your authority. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct (the Code) and to ensure your use of online media is well received we suggest the following general hints.

Do
- set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views
- be aware that the higher your profile as a councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network
- ensure you use council facilities appropriately; if you use a council provided blog site or social networking area, any posts you make are likely to be viewed as made in your official capacity
- be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a councillor you are likely to be seen as acting in your official capacity
- make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.

Don't
- blog in haste.
- post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- use council facilities for personal or political blogs.

When the Code of Conduct may apply

Bear in mind the Code when you blog or use social networking sites. You should pay particular attention to the following principles consistent with any Code adopted under the Localism Act 2011:

- selflessness
- integrity
- objectivity
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- leadership

However, it is difficult to give definitive advice on the application of the Code as each blog and social networking page is different. The content of a blog or other social networking tool and the circumstances surrounding its creation will determine whether or not it might be

covered by the Code. While your conduct may not be a breach of the Code it may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for your office and authority.

NB The Localism Act 2011 placed a general obligation to *"promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the authority "*