REPORT FOR DECISION

Bury
COUNCIL

DECISION OF:	**COUNCIL**
DATE:	**28 MARCH 2012**
SUBJECT:	**USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING DURING COUNCIL MEETINGS**
REPORT FROM:	**ASSISTANT DIRECTOR – LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**
CONTACT OFFICER:	**JAYNE HAMMOND, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**
TYPE OF DECISION:	**COMMITTEE**
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION/STATUS:	**This paper is within the public domain**
SUMMARY:	**This report sets out issues for discussion on the use of social networking/media during any formal Council meetings.**
OPTIONS & RECOMMENDED OPTION	**Members of Council should fully debate and decide on the policy as to whether or not Members can engage in the use of social media or networking during the business of any/all Council meetings.**

IMPLICATIONS:	
Corporate Aims/Policy Framework:	Do the proposals accord with the Policy Framework? **Yes**
Statement by the S151 Officer: Financial Implications and Risk Considerations:	There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Whilst the use of Social Media presents the Authority with an opportunity to engage better with residents, failure to adopt a robust policy / control framework would leave the Authority exposed to reputational risks, potentially resulting in financial penalty

Statement by Executive Director of Resources:	
Equality/Diversity implications:	At this stage there are no implications
Considered by Monitoring Officer:	Yes
Wards Affected:	All
Scrutiny Interest:	

TRACKING/PROCESS   **DIRECTOR: Deputy Chief Executive**

Chief Executive/ Strategic Leadership Team	Executive Member/Chair	Ward Members	Partners
Scrutiny Committee	Committee	Council	
	Democratic Arrangements Forum	28 March 2012	

1.0   SUMMARY

The Council currently has no policy position on the use of social media/networking during Council meetings. Informally it is left to the discretion of the Chair. This report sets out some of the issues, advantages and disadvantages of Members using social networking during any Council meeting and asks Members to consider these with a view to making a recommendation to Council if appropriate.

2.0   ISSUES

2.1   A social network is an online community of people, who share interests and activities. The network provides a variety of ways for users to interact, such as through e-mail, instant messaging, or posting and commenting on each others posts.   The most popular social networks include Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

2.2   Social networking and "blogging" are effective methods for Members to interact with constituents and support local democracy.   Whilst the Council has a Social Media Policy, the use of mobile devices which enable social networking during any Council meeting has been discretionary and is not incorporated into the Policy. Bury Council has its own blog for the purposes of giving information and advice. For example, when gritting is taking place or there is a school closure.

2.3 Taking part in social networks is growing. As representatives of local areas and democratically elected leaders of both their organisation and partnerships, Members will be expected to lead in using the social web. The Council has addressed social media as an organisation (through the Communications Team). It is fair to say that social media changes the way that Members interact with local people. Attached to this report at Appendix 1, are some of the myths around social media (as identified by the Local Government Group).

2.4 Supporters of Social Media for Public Figures and Public Bodies

Supporters of Social Media would say:

- In terms of community engagement, social media is usually relaxed, fairly open, meaning that a variety of people can see, comment, challenge on or collaborate on issues.

- The tools are fairly easy to use and social media is designed for sharing; so that there should be very low barriers to entry or sharing opinions with a potentially wide audience.

- Social media is the most powerful tool available today for building trust, and creating a sense of belonging in a local area.

- It is a quick modern way of communicating and an important platform for listening to residents, identifying problems and communicating   complex positions.

- It is useful for identifying audiences who may be receptive to particular messages and for creating a "buzz" around a particular topic.

- The use of social networks would create more openness and transparency around the Council's business.

- There is a relaxation of the normal interpersonal conduct because of its remoteness and virtual nature.

2.5 Concerns about Social Media for Public Figures and Public Bodies

Those concerned about Social Media would say:

- The reputational risks to Members personally (the danger could be that people will see postings and use them out of context – a statement that can be jocular in one context can be flippant in another example). There have already been a number of "Code of Conduct" issues in respect of comments made by Councillors in other authorities.

- There are also reputational issues for the Council as an organisation and inappropriate comments have led to some Councils banning the use of social media during meetings and via Council computers.

- There is a risk of excluding those with no access through over-reliance on social media as a large number of people are still not "on line".

- There is a risk of lack of balance, as personal comments are registered out of context with the lack of ability to respond (for example, one Members criticising another speaker while they are making a speech may give the wrong perception to the public, as the person making the speech is not able to make an immediate reply or not even made aware of the comments).

- Unintended Consequences - It is the case now that the professional media follow public figures on the social media sites for their postings and will often use these to generate stories, which are invariably controversial and negative toward the Councillor and this often becomes a reputational issue for the Council to deal with. The story recently about Tweeting at meetings of the Council came about by a journalist picking up a posting on a Bury Councillor's blog.

- Tweeting at a meeting can be seen as a distraction to other Members and can been seen as discourteous to those Members speaking at the meeting.

- Taken to extreme – what would happen if all Members in a meeting used social media throughout the course of the meeting – how would you get the degree of use right?

- The risk that public opinion is influenced negatively about the work of the Council in that whilst Councillors are tweeting during a meeting, they are not participating or concentrating on the meeting itself.

2.6 Other Issues

Public perception is important. Experience from other authorities has shown that whilst members of the public generally encourage and see the benefit of using social media, there seems to be caution against too much use in Council meetings. At a recent budget meeting in Salford, one Member who was on Twitter, was criticised by a member of the public, who considered that the Member was there to do a job for his constituents and should not have been looking for publicity. The member of the public queried how the Member could listen to the debate if he was busy posting on Twitter. Councillors in Cardiff, who have considered this as a policy issue, have spoken about the benefits of using social media but did caution against too much use in Council meetings.

In terms of perception, comparison could also be made with the private sector who skilfully use social media, but would probably not perform a live commentary half way through a business meeting.

There are also issues around engaging Members in this, as not all Members have the same sort of IT/social web skills. This could be addressed through Members' development or by engaging Members in a different way with the use of social media other than in Council meetings.

3.0 CONCLUSION

The whole issue of the use of social media by Councillors is unclear and open to different levels of interpretation.

It is clear that social media can be used to benefit local people and increase openness, transparency and community engagement. The question, therefore, is not if the Council uses social media but rather how the Council uses it. Members are, therefore, asked to consider the issues in this report and propose a clear policy as to whether Members can engage in social media during the business of Council meetings.

List of Background Papers:-

"Connected Councillors – A Guide to Using Social Media to Support Local Leadership" by the Local Government Group

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