

Social Media Policy for Councillors

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1. Introduction

Social media is a term used for online tools, websites and interactive media that enables users to interact with each other by sharing information, opinions, knowledge, and interests. This policy covers what is social media, the issues over using social media and Councillors' responsibilities to protect themselves and others where possible.

Social media is useful as it increases access to audiences and improves the accessibility of communication. It enables an active relationship with residents, partners and stakeholders whilst encouraging people to be involved in local decision making and enabling better engagement and feedback. This ultimately helps to improve the services provided. Social media can be very useful in getting feedback on proposals and communicating information about activities. However, it is important to remain aware that not everybody is on social media and so opinions expressed may not be representative of a specific cohort of people.

For the purposes of this policy and guidelines, the term 'social media' covers sites and applications including but not restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, discussion forums, wikis, Tiktok and any sites which may emerge after the creation of this policy where Bury Council could be represented via online participation.

Bury Council acknowledges social media as a useful tool, however, clear guidelines are needed for the use of social media sites to ensure they are used effectively as part of a wider communications mix and that their use does not expose Bury Council or people to security risks, reputational damage or breach the Data Protection Act.

2. Purpose

Social Media usage has significantly increased over the years. This Policy aims to provide support, guidance, and clarity on using social media efficiently and in line with Bury Council's principles and guidelines. This policy applies to councillors and co-opted members. It gives guidelines on how to use social media, sets out how to

effectively manage social media usage and indicates how any risks or pitfalls can be minimised or mitigated by users.

The following risks are identified with social media usage
(this list is not exhaustive):

- Virus or other malware infection from infected sites.
- Disclosure of confidential information.
- Damage to the Council's reputation.
- Social engineering attacks (known as 'phishing').
- Bullying or "trolling"
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation.
- Breach of safeguarding using images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.
- Breach of the code of conduct for members through inappropriate use.

Considering the risks, the use of social media sites should be regulated to ensure that such use does not damage the Council, its employees, councillors, partners or residents.

As such this policy aims to ensure:

- Users operate within existing policies, guidelines, and relevant legislation.
- A consistent and corporate approach is adopted
- Council information remains secure and not compromised
- The Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

3. Responsibilities of Councillors

You are personally responsible for any content that you publish on any form of social media as described above. Publishing or allowing to be published (in the form of a comment) an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may incur a libel action for which you will be personally liable.

- Be aware that social media sites are in the public domain, it is important to ensure you are confident of the validity and nature of the information you

publish. Make use of privacy settings if you don't want your social media to be accessed by the press or public. Do not disclose personal details and ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with the Council's data protection policy.

- Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business – if you have any concerns about other site users, you have a responsibility to report these.
- Do not publish or report on meetings which are private or internal (where no members of the public or press are present, or it is of a confidential nature) or exempt reports (which contain confidential information or matters which are exempt under the provision of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985).
- Use of social media in meetings must comply with the protocol for the use of recording devices during any meeting held under Bury Council.
- Copyright laws still apply online. Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g., extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about or seek permission from the copyright holder in advance.
- Don't send or post inappropriate, abusive, bullying, racist or defamatory messages to members of the public, other councillors or officers either in or outside a work environment.
- During the pre-election period the Council will not promote councillors' social media accounts.
- In any biography, the account should state the views are those of the councillor in question and may not represent the views of the Council.
- Do not use the Council's logo, or any other Council related material on a personal account or website.
- Social media must not be used for actions that would put councillors in breach of the Council's Code of conduct for members. For example, don't publish on social media something you wouldn't say face to face, or at a public meeting. Please do not post information relating to individual officers.
- Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you or others vulnerable.

- Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to their political group leader, the Monitoring Officer and/or the police.
- It is recommended that you have separate social media profiles for your role as a Councillor or Co-opted Member and your private life.

4. Conduct

Councillors are reminded that in respect of social media, they are governed by the Code of Conduct for Councillors and other Voting Representatives. You are acting in your “official capacity” and any conduct may fall within the Code whenever you:

- Conduct business of the Authority; or
- Act as a representative of the Authority, or
- Claim to act or give the impression you are acting as a representative of the Authority;

Breaches of this policy may amount to a breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct. Other violations of this policy, such as breaching the Data Protection Act, could lead to fines being issued and possible criminal or civil action being taken against the Council or the individual(s) involved.

The Council reserves the right to request the removal of any content that is deemed to be in breach of the code of conduct for members.

5. Principles for using social media

You should follow these guiding principles for any social media activities:

Be respectful – remember you are still governed by the Code of Conduct and rules of confidentiality during online exchanges. Set the tone for online conversations by being polite, open and respectful. Use familiar language, be cordial, honest and professional at all times.

Be trustworthy - make sure that you respect people's confidentiality – do not disclose non-public information from Council meetings, discussions or documents or the personal information of others.

Be credible and consistent – be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent. Encourage constructive criticism and deliberation. Make sure that what you say online is consistent with your other communications.

Be honest about who you are – it's important that any accounts or profiles that you set up are clearly and easily identifiable. You are personally responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media so it's important to clarify between your professional and private life, possibly having separate accounts.

Be responsive – make an effort to share what you know. Offer insights when appropriate and put people in touch with someone who can help if you cannot. Respond to questions and comments in a timely manner.

Think twice –Think carefully about all your social media posts. Once published it will be too late to change your mind; content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, screen shots may be taken of your post these used in different contexts, or further distributed.

Follow these rules and seek further guidance if you need it.

Inappropriate Use of Social Media by Others

Be aware of your own safety when placing information on the internet and do not publish information which could leave you vulnerable.

Anyone receiving threats, abuse or harassment via their use of social media should report it to the police. Other inappropriate content can be reported to the social media site directly to ask for it to be removed. You may wish to save a screenshot in the circumstances.

Any form of intimidation or abuse on a social media platform is subject to all the same potential criminal prosecutions as other forms of intimidation. If you feel intimidated, you should take action to report it to Bury Council, the Police and/or the Social Media Platform.

Where suitable, you should encourage the labelling of abusive and inappropriate online material so that both the perpetrator and others viewing it can also know it is not acceptable. However, it does not necessarily follow that the police or courts will regard it as intimidatory behaviour in law as they have to apply their own 'average person' tests, known as 'reasonableness tests' or the 'Clapham omnibus' test. Each situation will be different, and it will need your personal judgement about whether it is worthwhile to pursue the incident, ignore it or politely acknowledge.

As a Council we suggest you take the following steps should you need to handle abuse on social media:

1. Keep a record

If you receive online abuse, even if you are not concerned or if you intend to ignore it, you should consider keeping a record should any incidents escalate in the future. You can 'screen shot', tweets or posts on your phone, tablet, or computer as these could be deleted.

2. Report the abuse

In any situation that arises on social media, you will need to decide whether you want to engage in a discussion or ignore it, and whether the communication is abusive, intimidatory or threatening.

If someone has posted some inaccurate information about you or Bury Council, and if the information is defamatory again, the first step is to gather evidence. You may then want to contact the individual initially to request that the tweet or post be deleted; some individuals may have made a mistake without malice and will remove their post immediately. Depending on the nature of the tweet or post and the number

of followers who may have viewed the tweet, you may wish to seek a correction and/or an apology.

If the tweet or post is a complaint about a council service, you can ask for contact details and pass the information to officers to follow-up on and inform the individual that this is the course of action you are taking. This may help defuse any tensions.

3. Muting or Blocking Troublesome Accounts

You may wish to unfollow, mute or even block a person or group who is persistently tweeting you or is being abusive or intimidatory. Guidance about how to mute and block is available from the respective social media platform, but in summary:

Muting allows you to remove an account's tweets from your timeline but does not go as far as unfollowing or blocking the account. Muted accounts will not know that they have been muted and you can 'unmute' them at any time. This is a good option if the tweets are more of a hinderance, and you want to simply ignore them.

However, in other cases you may wish to 'block' an account. Blocking allows you to restrict specific accounts from contacting you, seeing your tweets or following you. Unlike muting, the perpetrators can find out that they have been 'blocked' and may accuse you of avoiding their scrutiny; this may be a small price to pay if their behaviour is checked and can be easily rebutted if necessary.

6. Guidance on Capturing Social Media Posts

In exceptional circumstances, copies of posts may be made and retained by the Council, in line with relevant Council procedures. These copies will be held for a period dependent on the type of investigation they are subject to.

Where inappropriate use is suspected, it is suggested that you should pro-actively attempt to capture any inappropriate posts before they might be deleted.

Copies should be made and reported to the Monitoring Officer within the Council, as well as following the social media sites own reporting procedures where appropriate.

7. Relationship with Other Council Policies

This social media policy should be read in conjunction with, :

- The Code of conduct for members
- The Data protection policy which outlines the Council's adherence to the eight principles of the Data Protection Act 1998 with regards the collection, storage and use of personal data.
- The Media 2020 Policy
- Member Safety policy

Further support and guidance can be found at <https://www.local.gov.uk/further-resources> or by contacting Democratic Services Democratic.Services@bury.gov.uk.

Members are asked to sign to show that they have received and understood the social media policy and related to guidance.

Member Signature Date.....