



| <b>Report of:</b>  | <b>Meeting</b> | <b>Date</b>     | <b>Item no.</b> |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Cllr B Birch,<br>Chairman of the<br>Standards Committee<br>and Liesl Hadgraft,<br>Monitoring Officer | Council        | 7 December 2017 | 16              |

### **Social Media Policy for Councillors**

#### **1. Purpose of report**

1.1 To enable a social media policy for Councillors to be approved.

#### **2. Outcomes**

2.1 More effective communication and public engagement and improved standards of behaviour by Councillors.

#### **3. Recommendation**

3.1 That the contents of the proposed Social Media Policy for Councillors, attached as Appendix 1, be approved and included in Part 5 of the Constitution.

#### **4. Background**

4.1 When they are first elected, all Councillors are required to sign the Council's computer use policy which, although it refers to electronic communications on behalf of the Council, relates mainly to the use of Council equipment and systems. Some general guidance about social media has also been made available in the past, but the Council does not currently have a specific policy on the use of social media by Councillors. The Council's Standards Committee, at its meeting in June 2017, asked the Monitoring Officer to draw up such a policy for consideration.

## 5. Key issues and proposals

- 5.1** The use of social media has expanded hugely in recent years and its use by Councillors is now much more prevalent. Both nationally and locally, complaints about comments made by councillors on social media platforms, often in response to comments made by members of the public, are becoming more common. Many councils now have a social media policy.
- 5.2** In order to provide clearer guidance to Wyre Councillors and to be transparent about the Council's position, it is proposed that a policy be approved and made public. The inclusion of such a policy in the Constitution will also make it easier for the Standards Committee to decide, if required to do so when dealing with a complaint, whether comments made on social media by a Councillor amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct.
- 5.3** The social media policy attached as Appendix 1, which has been developed from a policy already in place at South Ribble, was considered and endorsed by the Standards Committee at its meeting on 16 November 2017 and is now recommended for adoption by the Council.

| <b>Financial and legal implications</b> |   |
|---|---|
| Finance                                 | None.   |
| Legal                                   | General legal issues to be considered when using social media are included in paragraph 4 of the proposed policy. |

### **Other risks/implications: checklist**

If there are significant implications arising from this report on any issues marked with a ✓ below, the report author will have consulted with the appropriate specialist officers on those implications and addressed them in the body of the report. There are no significant implications arising directly from this report, for those issues marked with a x.

| <b>risks/implications</b> | <b>✓ / x</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| community safety          | x            |
| equality and diversity    | x            |
| sustainability            | x            |
| health and safety         | x            |

| <b>risks/implications</b> | <b>✓ / x</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| asset management          | x            |
| climate change            | x            |
| data protection           | x            |

| report author | telephone no. | email                    | date     |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Roy Saunders  | 01253 887481  | roy.saunders@wyre.gov.uk | 06/11/17 |

| <b>List of background papers:</b> |             |                                       |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>name of document</b>           | <b>date</b> | <b>where available for inspection</b> |
| None                              | -           | -                                     |

**List of appendices**

Appendix 1 - Social Media Policy

Appendix 2 - Flow Chart

arm/ex/cou/cr/17/0712rs

## Wyre Council

### Social Media Policy for Councillors

#### **1. Purpose**

Social Media is an incredibly powerful method of engagement which many Councillors now use as a platform to enhance their profile and communicate with the public. It allows you to open up new conversations with the people you represent, understand and respond swiftly to local concerns, coordinate campaigns, assist with casework and let your constituents know what you are doing as their local councillor, all at often a fraction of the cost of more traditional means of communication.

However, there can also be pitfalls and to help minimise any risk this policy sets out what you need to keep in mind whenever you use Social Media in your official role as a Wyre Councillor.

#### **2. What is Social Media?**

This is a term used to describe websites and applications for social networking. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and blogs. On social media sites users share information, discuss opinions and build online communities and networks.

You may already use social media in a private capacity. Consider if you want to create a separate account for any “Councillor” related use such as a separate Twitter account or YouTube channel. However Facebook are now clamping down on what they consider to be ‘duplicate’ accounts therefore as a Facebook user you need to consider if you wish your account to be for private use only or used for public engagement.

This policy and the Code of Conduct for Members both only apply when you are acting in your official capacity as an Elected Member. However, you need to be aware that it may not always be apparent to a member of the public in which capacity you are commenting. This “blurred identity” may have implications if comments made in a private capacity are taken to be those of the Council itself or your political party.

Online impressions count, how you portray yourself online is very important. Consider carefully how you may appear to someone who doesn’t know you personally – Is your online profile reflective of who you are and what you represent? Use our [social media checklist for Councillors](#) and/or the attached diagram as a guide to help you develop your online presence.

#### **3. Social Media and the Code of Conduct for Members**

Certain sections of the Code of Conduct for Members will apply to your online activity in just the same way as they do to any other written or verbal communication. The key to whether the Code applies is whether you are (or even just appear to be) acting in your capacity as a Wyre Councillor rather than as a private individual.

When using any social media platform you should take particular care not to publish anything which might result in you breaching the Code of Conduct, taking care, in particular, to comply you comply with the general provisions and obligations set out in Part 1 of the Code of Conduct. In doing so, have regard to the following behaviours:

**You should always treat others with respect** – do not use social media to make personal attacks or indulge in rude, disrespectful or offensive comments.

**You must comply with equality laws** – take care that you do not publish anything which might be considered to be sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or anti faith.

**You must not bully or intimidate anyone** – do not say anything that might be construed as bullying or intimidation whether the comments relate to a council employee, a fellow Councillor or anyone else.

**You must not disclose confidential information** – refrain from publishing anything you have received in confidence.

#### **4. General legal considerations**

There are no new or additional legal burdens when using social media but you are publishing to the web – it's written down and it's permanent so you need to bear the following in mind:

**Libel** – If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation then they may take a libel action against you. This may also happen if someone else publishes something libellous on your website which you know about and don't take prompt action to remove. A successful libel action can result in an award of damages against you.

**Copyright** – Publishing images or text on your site from a copyrighted source (e.g. photos or extracts from publications) without obtaining permission first is likely to breach copyright laws. Breaching copyright laws can result in damages being awarded against you.

**Data Protection** – Take care not to publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their specific permission.

**Bias and Pre- determination** – Whenever you are involved in making planning, licensing or other quasi-judicial decisions do not say anything on social media which suggests that you have already made up your mind before hearing all the evidence and arguments. Otherwise the decision may be at risk of being challenged and declared invalid.

**Obscene material** – Obviously you should avoid publishing anything on social media which anyone might consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

**Harassment** – it is a criminal offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against someone where this is likely to cause alarm, harassment, nuisance or distress.

**Electoral Periods** - There are some additional duties around campaigning during elections. If you are intending to make comments on social media in the period leading up to an election check the Electoral Commission website for the latest detailed guidance before doing so.

## **5. Use of Social Media during Council Meetings**

Use mobile devices sparingly, discreetly and with common sense at meetings. Take care to avoid extended periods of use which may give the impression that insufficient attention is being paid to the business of the meeting.

Do not use social media during quasi-judicial meetings or during confidential or exempt items of business.

Always ensure that devices are switched to silent during meetings and their use is not disturbing others.

## **6. Staying Out of Trouble – some Do's and Do not's**

Most pitfalls can be avoided if your online content is objective, balanced, informative and accurate.

Here are some tips to help you stay out of trouble:

### **Some Do's**

- Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site (especially if you have a private non-political account)
- Where possible, consider keeping your personal and elected member profile on social networking sites separate and maintain appropriate professional boundaries
- Look out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your site and remove them as soon as possible to avoid any impression that you condone such comments
- Be careful about any connection with service users who are vulnerable adults or children as this could be regarded as a safeguarding issue
- Ensure that you seek permission to post information from a copyrighted source or any personal data
- Take care not to give the impression that you have already made up your mind before hearing all the evidence and arguments if you are involved in any planning, licensing or other quasi-judicial decision
- Keep posts positive as evidence suggests these are more popular and likely to generate more support for your cause than negative or critical messages
- Set an example by engaging in healthy and respectful debate which will encourage others (especially young people) to adopt similar online behaviours
- Take care not to publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their specific permission.

### **Some Do not's**

- Post in haste, particularly if your judgement might be impaired (for example if you have consumed alcohol)
- Post comments that you would not be prepared to make face to face, or put in writing in a formal letter
- Use Council facilities for personal or political blogs

- Use social media to attack, insult, abuse, defame or make negative or discriminatory comments about anyone (including council staff, service users, or the Council itself)
- Publish confidential information which you have gained access to as a Wyre Councillor
- Represent your personal views, or those of any political party or specialist interest group you belong to, as being those of the Council
- Distribute any material which could be considered inappropriate, offensive, illegal or discriminatory
- Robust political debate with other politicians is fine from time to time but do not let it degenerate into personal attacks
- Forget to consider your wider audience, online posts may be read by younger people who could be distressed at messages which had been intended for their parents or close relatives
- Make excessive use of social media technology during Council or Committee meetings as this may give the impression you are not engaged in the business of the meeting
- Forget to consider that anything written online can be screenshot and posted publicly.

## **7. Finally...**

Although you need to be aware of the potential risks most Councillors using Social Media engage with the public in an entirely constructive way without ever running foul of either the Code of Conduct or the Law.

For further advice and guidance on using social media look on the [Engagement pages](#) on BRIAN

Use your common sense, relax and enjoy.

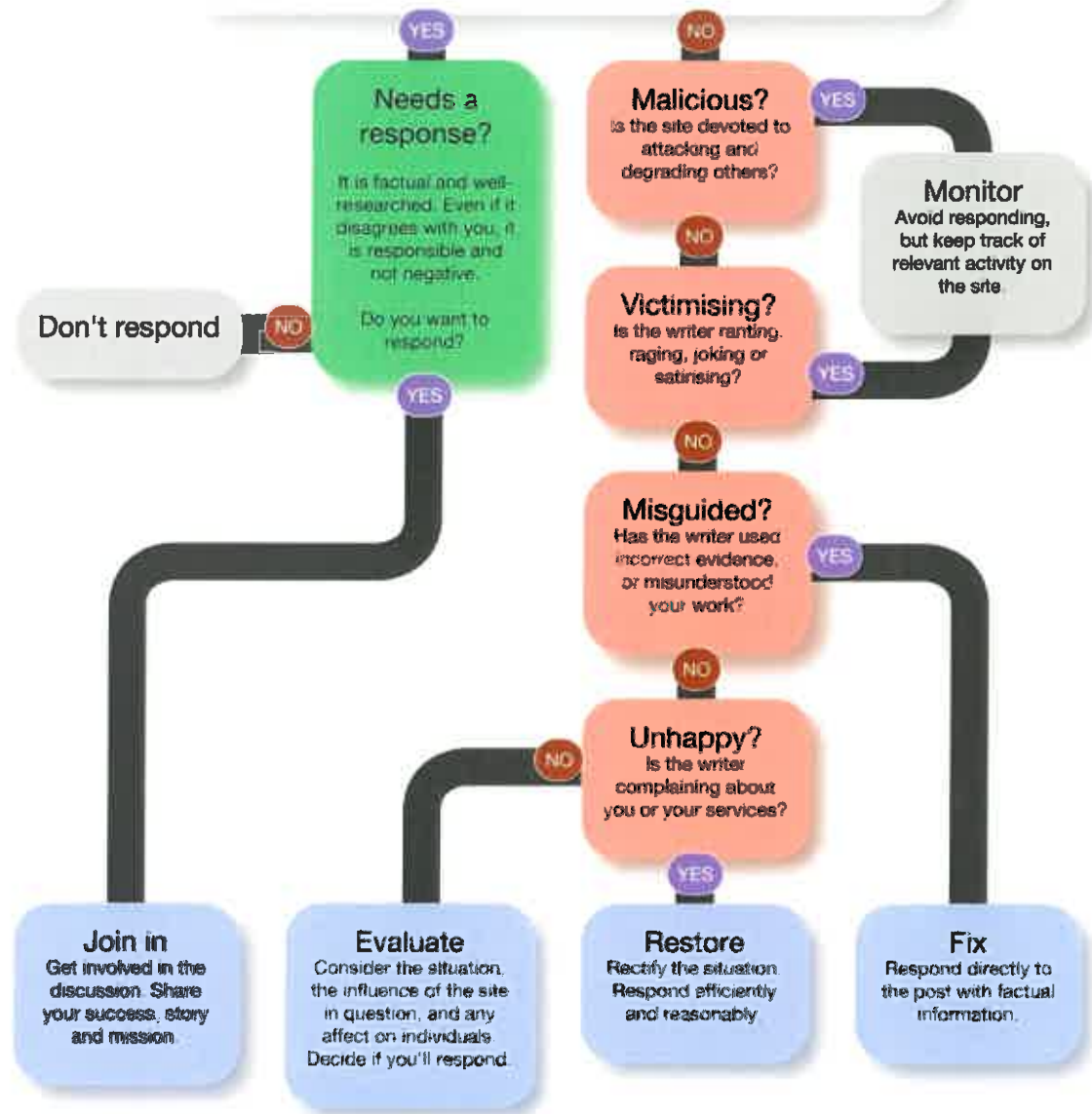
**Monitoring Officer**

**November 2017**

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# Knowing when to join the social media conversation

Someone has written about you online.  
Is it positive?



## Before you respond...

**Be transparent**  
Be honest about your connection to the story.

**Cite sources**  
Be clear about your sources, and include links to them.

**Don't rush**  
Take time to make your response a good one.

**Get the tone right**  
Reflect your organisation's richness and test your response on a colleague.

**Focus**  
Focus on your most influential online activity.

By Michael Gross <http://mivens.net/uk/>, inspired by US Air Force Blog Assessment  
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