



CLILC • WLGA

# Social Media

A Guide for Councillors



# Contact

## Welsh Local Government Association

The WLGA's primary purposes are to promote a better local government, its reputation and to support authorities in the development of policies and priorities which will improve public service and democracy.

It represents the 22 local authorities in Wales with the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities as associate members.

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# Introduction

Social media is changing the world.

It is changing the way we communicate, the way we receive our news and, increasingly, the way we think about ourselves and others. Social media is transforming politics too; it makes politicians and public institutions more accessible, allows individuals to have their voices heard and helps share ideas or promote campaigns, potentially to millions, in an instant.

It is a powerful tool that can do much good but, in the wrong hands, can cause harm too. The growth of online abuse or trolling is a concern, as is the mounting evidence that organisations or even foreign agencies can exploit social media or use 'fake news' to influence public opinion or even affect democratic contests<sup>1</sup>.

Social media's influence is growing, not only are the number of active users increasing but it is also being used more effectively as a medium to communicate, engage and mobilise.

Social media has therefore become a vital tool for councils and councillors to inform and engage with the communities they serve.

Many councillors already use social media and many more are thinking about using it. As a councillor, there are additional things to consider when using it, including the Code of Conduct and managing expectations and workload.

This guidance offers advice for those councillors who are new to social media and some tips for those already using it. Social media is rapidly evolving, so this guidance offers a general overview, some key pointers and principles and references to step-by-step resources online.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39830727> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41355903>

# 1. What is social media?

Social media is a vast blanket term applied to a range of online multimedia tools; in short, social media allows you to communicate, broadcast or publish to millions in an instant, usually for free and all from a small device in the palm of your hand.

Social media can be set up and accessed via your smartphone, PC, laptop, tablet or smart TV. Social media applications (apps) or platforms allow you to communicate (either with individuals, specific groups or everyone), share information, share photos, create, edit and share audio or videos and play games with others.

Councils now use social media as a matter of course to communicate and consult with their residents who now expect this to be another communication channel, especially for urgent information. Council Twitter feeds include information on community events, school and road closures, job vacancies, sporting events and consultations, as well as details and, occasionally, detailed accounts of council meetings, including links to webcasts. Council scrutiny committees may also be using social media to promote and consult on their activities and undertake service reviews, such as in [Monmouthshire](#) and [Swansea](#).

Although there are some risks to using social media, which will be covered later in this guide, social media can be fun and innovative and can be used as an alternative method of communication and engagement, it can also break down barriers and stereotypes. Councils and other public bodies have used it for positive public relations, for example, it is worth looking at Swansea's [Faces of Swansea](#) social media campaign or the Twitter account [Love the Lagoon](#), or Torfaen's '[In the Depot](#)' video.

Some councils [have asked the public to name snow ploughs](#).

We have social media to thank for [Boaty McBoatface](#)!

Social media has a massive reach and some individuals (typically celebrities or national politicians) have many millions of followers. Social media is growing in usage too, an Office of National Statistics survey in 2017<sup>2</sup> showed that 66% of people in the UK had used social media in the last 3 months. It's not just younger people who use social media, further research by the ONS showed that that there is significant use across all age groups:

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/adhocs/007401socialnetworkingbyagegroup2011to2017>

Age	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	All
%	96	88	83	68	51	27	66

According to Ofcom<sup>3</sup>, in 2017:



**84%**  
OF WELSH HOUSEHOLDS  
HAD ACCESS TO THE  
INTERNET



**74%**  
OF ADULTS USED  
A SMARTPHONE



**21 Hours**  
ON AVERAGE SPENT  
ONLINE EVERY WEEK BY  
WELSH INTERNET USERS

Facebook and Twitter are the most widely used social media platforms and therefore the most relevant to councillors. According to Twitter<sup>4</sup>, and Facebook<sup>5</sup> there are:



AN ESTIMATED  
**17.1m**  
TWITTER USERS  
IN UK



**30m**  
FACEBOOK USERS IN THE UK  
ON MOBILES ALONE...  
AND OVER 2.20bn MONTHLY  
ACTIVE USERS WORLDWIDE

This guide will therefore focus on Facebook and Twitter for councillors, and will touch on other platforms too.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/104985/cmr-2017-wales.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/104985/cmr-2017-wales.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271350/twitter-users-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

## Blogs

A blog (an abbreviation of “web-log”) is essentially an online journal with your latest posts appearing first. It can be a journal of diary entries, thoughts or ideas or somewhere to publish more detailed articles on particular issues. Anyone can add comments to your blog and you can use the site to link or draw attention to other online comments or sources of information. Blogs are most effective when they are regularly maintained and updated.

Blogs tend to be included as part of an existing website or via Facebook, which means it’s easier to promote and encourage broader feedback.

Some leaders or chairs produce blogs via their council websites, for example in [Caerphilly](#), [Rhondda Cynon Taf](#), and [Chairman of Denbighshire County Council](#).

Other councillors publish their own, for example:

- [Cllr Peter Black](#)
- [Deputy Lord Mayor of Swansea 2018-2019](#)
- [Cllr Neil Prior](#)

### Keep at it!

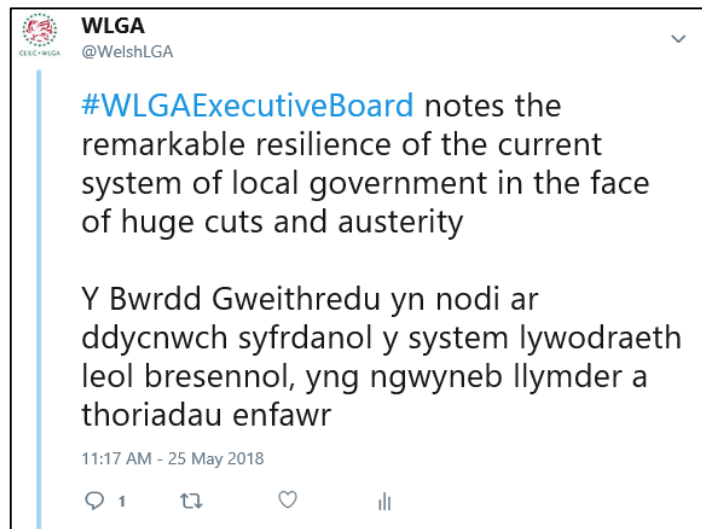
As with all social media, if you start blogging, it’s best to keep it up and keep it up-to-date; all it takes is for someone to find your last blog entry of some years ago and they can criticise you by saying ‘you have nothing else to say’ or ‘you have no new ideas’. If you do stop blogging, think about archiving the material or moving it over to a new social media platform.



**Twitter** is technically a micro-blog. Twitter allows you to post information, news, photos or videos in messages that are known as **tweets**. Twitter enables you to **follow** people, organisations, news or information that you are interested in and post information and messages of your own. People or organisations in turn can follow you, so they can see all of your tweets; you can even adjust the settings to allow you to be alerted when someone you’re particularly interested in tweets.

Tweets are each limited to 280 characters (characters include letters, numbers, punctuation and spaces). Tweets are not a private means of communication and can be seen by anyone who is following you.

For example:



You can **like** or **retweet** information and someone else's tweets that you would like to pass on to others. For example:



Conversations on the same theme on Twitter are called **threads**. You can search for tweets on a subject that you are interested in by typing your subject into the search box.



Tweets on the same theme are drawn together using **hashtags**. People use the hashtag symbol (#) before a relevant keyword or phrase in their tweet to categorise those tweets and help them show more easily in a Twitter search. Clicking on a hash tagged word in any message shows you other Tweets that include that hashtag.

You can have a private conversation or create a group conversation with anyone who follows you by using the **Direct Message** option. Anyone you do not follow can also send you a Direct

### Warning

As a politician, others may consider your tweets 'fair game'. A good rule of thumb is not to commit anything to social media that could at some point be used against you. Even your retweets can be perceived as something you endorse or support.

As with emails, although Direct Messages are private and you may trust the recipients, they can become public if leaked!

### Here are some examples of councillors' Twitter accounts:

[@LeaderNewport](#)

[@CllrRobJames](#)

[@PeterFox61](#)

[@Cllrjuliefallon](#)

[@CllrSaif](#)

[@CllrFionaCross](#)

[@elinmwj](#)

[@DebbieWallice](#)

[@Alun\\_Williams](#)

[@CllrJoshuaPlaid](#)

[@CllrLisaMytton](#)

[@PriorNeil](#)

### And some useful organisations:

[@WelshLGA](#)

[@LGAComms](#)

[@WelshGovernment](#)

[@WG\\_localgov](#)

[@AssemblyWales](#)

[@BBCWalesNews](#)

Message, if you have opted to receive Direct Messages from anyone or you have previously sent that person a Direct Message.

You can **block** or **mute** accounts on Twitter. Once an account has been blocked, those accounts cannot follow you and you cannot follow them. However, even those you have blocked can still access your account through a third party who follows you.

All the details about how twitter works and how you can set up an account can be found [here](#).



**Facebook** is the most extensively used social network in the world. Essentially, it allows you to easily create your own webpage or group, or an interactive newsletter about you, your life, your interests and friends.

Have a look at these councillors' pages

- [Councillor Neil Prior](#)
- [Councillor Dhanisha Patel](#)
- [Councillor Matthew Dorrance](#)
- [Councillor Steve Churchman](#)

And these authority pages:

- [Wrexham Council](#)
- [Isle of Anglesey County Council](#)
- [Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council](#)
- [Snowdonia National Park](#)
- [Flintshire County Council](#)
- [Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

To use Facebook, you'll need to create a profile - a **Timeline** where you might add a photo, describe yourself, what you do and your interests. You can also describe your **Status** which would inform your friends about how you are feeling or what you are doing at any given time. You can update this as often as you like.

On Facebook, you can invite people to be your **Friends** and set different levels of access to your account. Some people can see all the information about you or you can make less detail available to others. You can also use Facebook to communicate with groups or individuals. People who find your page, comments or proposals of interest can **Like** you or your latest post, which encourages further use, and is a useful way of taking a straw poll of your ideas. People can also add a **Comment** on your post or **Share** your post on their own timelines.

You may wish to set up a Facebook page about your community, to promote events, announcements or your council activities; many councils and councillors do this and it can be a very effective method to engage and seek views from the community. You should be prepared to receive challenge and criticism however, as it is an open forum and not everyone will agree with your ideas or views; you can however set rules, moderate and edit other people's posts if their language or content is offensive or inappropriate.

You can also set up a Facebook group. When you [create a group](#), you can decide whether to make it publicly available for anyone to join, require administrator approval for members to join or keep it private and by invitation only.

You can send private notes to any "friend" you're connected with on Facebook; they can only be seen by the person to whom they're sent; Facebook's **Messenger** app is increasingly popular. You can also **'Live Chat'** on Facebook. This is a real-time conversation with any of your Facebook friends who happen to be online and signed in at the same time as you are.

Crucially, Facebook lets each user control who can see their personal information and what they post on the network. You can set the level of privacy for different categories of your information and posts and extend different levels of permission to different people who view your site. As a member you might want to differentiate between what you show your close friends and family and members of the public. Find out more and join Facebook [here](#).



**WhatsApp** is a free messaging app which also allows you to have traditional 'phone conversations'. It is very popular as it allows you to set up groups of friends or colleagues to keep them updated on a particular theme. It may be a quick and easy way, for example, of keeping your political group up to date on key issues. You can download the app from various app stores or visit [the website](#).



**YouTube** is a video sharing platform. Videos are easy to record via a smartphone and are more easily distributed via Twitter or Facebook, however, some people prefer to use YouTube and it is increasingly being used by councils to post information. Here are some examples:

[Cardiff](#)

[Conwy](#)

[Gwynedd](#)

[Monmouthshire](#)

[Powys](#)

## 2. Why you may find social media useful

Social media will allow you to open new conversations with the people you represent, and the potential for councillors using social media is huge. Social media allows you to be innovative and responsive as well as providing links to useful sources of information or sign-posting to other organisations.

Don't ignore social media – it's there and won't go away! People are already online and it's growing, and people increasingly expect their councillors to be contactable via social media. If you're not involved people may bypass you or may even 'talk about you' and you'll be missing out on a useful source of intelligence.

- It's a useful way of finding out what people are talking about locally, their concerns and interests.
- It's useful for finding out about breaking news, the latest research or publication or the latest policy announcements from political parties.
- It's a good way of making the electorate more aware of the work you do personally.
- It can help make you appear more human and down-to-earth! People often don't understand what councillors do and may have negative perceptions, but social media can give people a taste of your personal life and remind them that you are just like them, with similar interests – you do need to consider balance though and how much of your personal life you want in the public domain: for example - do you want strangers to be able to identify your family and friends?
- It's an effective way of coordinating campaigns, for example, mobilising support and interest and gathering followers, you can also allow campaign workers access to your Facebook account to post on your, or your campaign's, behalf to share the workload.
- It allows you to have a conversation with a range of people that you would never be able to physically meet and who do not traditionally seek out their local representatives.
- It allows for immediate communication. You can pass on information and receive opinions in minutes. You can forward information from other people equally quickly. "Going Viral" refers to a mass spreading of a piece of information around the world – but be careful, only share information you are confident is correct, Fake News is damaging and there is the risk of defamation if you spread falsehoods.

- The local and sometimes national press will follow councillors on Twitter or Facebook. Social media is a growing source for stories for news outlets as each tweet or comment is effectively a mini-press release. Journalists will know what you are talking about the minute you talk about it.
- Social media is mobile. You can take it around your community, on the train, or to a coffee shop. You can upload pictures and videos, showing for example your role in local events, pictures of potential sites for development, new buildings, local eyesores - a picture tells a thousand words.
- It's free and you probably already have the equipment you need. All you need is time.
- You can receive immediate feedback on your ideas and manifesto to allow you to modify your proposals in line with local thinking.
- Above all, it can be a lot of fun!

## **What are the drawbacks?**

- Having a social media presence means that people can contact you 24/7. This is great in terms of accessibility but means that they may expect you to reply immediately. Technology and social media has raised expectations, people often expect a speedy response and resolution to their query; this expectation, coupled with the fact that social media shows everyone how responsive you are, can create more pressure.
- Using social media can become addictive, many people find themselves answering messages late into the night because they just can't put it down.
- Similarly, too much weight can be given to what goes on in the 'Twittersphere'; sections of Twitter are often described as 'echo chambers' – it may only be a couple of people with a limited number of followers with strong views on a subject who are 'bouncing' off each other – they may be in the minority and not be representative - the rest of the community or the rest of society may be blissfully unaware or may not think in the same way!
- People can post false information, insults or messages that you would not want to be associated with on your social media platforms. These can be spread rapidly via social media.

- Some people say things via social media that they would not say to your face, it's an easy way of taking personal pot shots at councillors. People making these comments are often called 'Trolls' and may not be interested in facts, just in attacking you.
- Councillors, and in particular women councillors, are increasingly the subject of online abuse, bullying and harassment on social media.
- The WLGA has produced a [separate guide](#) on how to deal with online abuse.

**It's easier said than done, but try not to get too concerned about what's said online...**

You are likely to receive criticism at some point and trolls may try to rile you, but often they will have few followers and their comments may not be seen by many people. Keep calm and the best advice is to ignore, often trolls will crawl back under their bridge...if it does get serious, you can report it

## Are you controlling your social media use or is it controlling you?

Recent research has recognised that some people feel out of control in their use of social media<sup>6</sup>.

Ask yourself how comfortable you feel if you cannot access your social media accounts. It is important for councillors to bear in mind that even if the rest of the world seems to be online 24/7, you don't have to be. Being a councillor is a professional role and you can decide how available you want to make yourself. There are some common recommendations for managing your time in front of a screen and you may want to consider some of these:

### Top tips to manage social media use

- Establish a routine, check your messages at the same time every day rather than responding to the 'ping' of every new message arriving
- Looking at a screen can disrupt your sleep patterns, consider turning off all screens two hours before going to bed and make the bedroom a screen free zone
- When you are with your residents face to face, give them your undivided attention to help you focus on what's happening where you are and not appear rude.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180118-how-much-is-too-much-time-on-social-media>

### 3. Getting started

A good place to start is to contact your Democratic Services officers and find out what support and training is available.

Choose your medium and sign up. Signing up is very straightforward and will take you less than five minutes! Facebook and Twitter are good places to start.

If you don't already have an account, ask a colleague, friend or family member for advice, ask them to show you how they use social media. You might want to begin with a trial personal account (rather than calling yourself "Councillor Jones") and experiment with family and friends. Make sure that you understand how people find you and who can access your material.

#### **Remember:**

On Facebook you can control who has access to different parts of your account. You can manage what the world sees and what your "friends" see.

On Twitter the whole world can see everything you tweet. You can '**Protect my Tweets**', which essentially makes your tweets private to only your current followers, but that defeats the object of using Twitter to engage more widely.

When you are ready to set up your final account, consider the identity you use. The name you give yourself online is important as it allows people to find you. Prefacing your Twitter account with Cllr lets people know exactly who you are and indicates that the Code of Conduct will apply.

#### **Consider:**

- Different councillors have different views, but you might want to consider setting up a separate personal and "councillor" account, at least at first - you can talk about the amazing food in the restaurant around the corner to your friends and followers in your informal account, and the plans for the new bypass to your friends and followers on your councillor account.

Separate accounts can help you manage some of the online trolling that is likely to come your way as a councillor – it can be a way of keeping your home life and councillor life separate.



However, many councillors think that some of their personal comments about food, places they've visited, football matches or TV helps break down perceptions of councillors and proves that they are normal like everyone else!

- Make it easy for people to find you online. Many people will start their search for the area that you represent, so make sure you mention your location frequently as this will then be picked up by search engines. You will also want to make sure that your social media account details are on your business cards, posters and flyers.
- Increase your social media following by following other people, retweeting other people's tweets, liking tweets or posts or commenting on people's Facebook posts. Find people on Twitter with links to your community, county or region or with similar interests by searching using the 'hashtag' (#) symbol to prefix your search term for example #llandrindod, #powys #midwales.
- Reach more people on Twitter by timing your tweets when the audience you want to reach are online. Ask your friends for a retweet, use hashtags and include photos for a larger and more noticeable post.
- Be disciplined about making time available to write new content and answer your "friends" and "followers" at a regular time each week to update your Facebook status and throughout the day to check Twitter. If you use your mobile phone, you can set notifications to alert you each time you are mentioned in a tweet.
- If you do not want to be available every hour of the day or night, tell people when your account will be checked, for example you might add "available 9.00-7.00 weekdays" on your profile.
- Decide on what you are going to talk about and how. This could be
  - Weekly updates of your own activities as a councillor - don't forget your pictures! This works better on Facebook as you can include more detail. Remember a tweet is only 280 characters and tends to be more instant and timely.
  - Regular updates on council policies and actions of interest to your community.
  - Links and re-tweets of other relevant national activities.
  - Issues on which you would like feedback.
  - Notice of events and public meetings.

- Using social media is all about two-way communication, it's good for providing information to your community or flagging up press statements, but it's better as a tool to get useful feedback. You will get feedback and you should expect some people to challenge your ideas or enter into a debate with you online. This is part and parcel of social media.
- Keep your communications clear, positive, polite and professional. Plain language helps. Many people use abbreviations on Twitter – you'll pick these up as you go along!
- On Facebook, you will need to monitor and, if necessary, censor the contributions that other people make to your page; or group and delete them if they do not match your required standards of behaviour or language. Defamatory and offensive language could be attributed to the publisher (that's you!) as well as the original author and could incur financial liability. It is up to you to decide if you want to remove posts that disagree with your political position, however if you do remove them you may be accused of censoring contributions on political grounds.
- It is up to you to decide if you want to remove posts that disagree with your political position, however if you do remove them you may be accused of censoring contributions on political grounds.
- Bear in mind that constituents may find party political point scoring tedious and prefer to hear information about what you are achieving.
- If appropriate, consider setting up an account for your ward with your fellow ward members – this way you can share the administrative tasks.
- If you don't have anything to say...don't say anything. Even though it's tempting to let your followers know how busy you are they will soon become bored with constant updates on your day without some relevant or interesting information.

## **Monitoring social media**

It can be difficult to keep on top of what's happening online; people are posting and tweeting all the time and if you are following many people or organisations, social media can become 'noisy' and you could miss things of interest or significance.

A quick way to check up on things on Twitter is to visit the Twitter page of some of your favourite people, organisations or news outlets to see what they've been saying. You could also search for a particular theme or issue with a hashtag#.

If you're keen to find out what people are saying about you, your local area or local council for example, there are social media management applications that you can use such as [Hootsuite](#) or [Buffer](#). These are simple to set up and use and can allow you to see how often people read or retweet your tweets. It also allows you to schedule tweets, for example, to send a pre-prepared tweet at a certain time of day.

## **The Welsh Language**

As a councillor you will want to use and promote the Welsh language and culture as much as possible. There are also legal requirements which apply to the use of the Welsh language on social media. How these rules apply, depends on the type of work you are doing and which of the Welsh Language Standards apply to your local authority.

When you are representing your local authority, the same standards will apply to you as they do to officers. So, if you are, for example, a cabinet member tweeting about a new policy decision, a mayor blogging about your recent activities on behalf of the council, the chair of a scrutiny committee undertaking a formal consultation on behalf of the committee or letting people know about the forward work programme of the committee, then you may be subject to the standards which apply to the officers in your authority.

This may mean that your communication, including responses to messages, must be translated and the content and format of the message must treat the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language. Your authority will provide you with guidelines for how your local Welsh language standards apply when you are representing the authority – if you are in any doubt, it's best to contact the council for guidance.

If you are acting in the capacity of a ward member, acting on behalf of individuals or communities then the same rules apply as if you were a member of the public. So, regardless of your role on the council, if you are tweeting about a local fete, commenting on a council decision in, for example, your role on a local pressure group, or retweeting a complaint about pot holes then you may communicate in the language of your choice.

The exception to this is when you are communicating in relation to an activity for which you are using council resources (beyond the standard remuneration and equipment provided to you as a member) for example council buildings for a community meeting.

Some of the [practical guidance](#) in the Welsh Language Commissioner's guide for businesses and charities about using Welsh on social media may be useful.

## 4. Staying safe and dealing with trolls

Some form of online disagreement and criticism is inevitable and, if you're not online, you or your policies may already be subject to debate without you. Disagreement and challenge is a key feature of democratic debate, however, online it can easily spill over into abuse or harassment.

You will therefore need to prepare yourself for some uncomfortable reading, which may cause some upset. You cannot prevent online abuse, but you can take control of how and whether you respond and, if it becomes serious, you can report it.

**The WLGA has produced separate guidance on dealing with online abuse which you may find useful.** You can read it [here](#).

### Some advice

- **Take Control**

Decide for yourself and make it clear on your homepage what you expect from people who are engaging with you on social media. You might say, for example, that whilst you welcome an open and frank exchange of views, any inappropriate comments will be removed and that any comment which is libellous or threatening or becomes harassment will be reported.

- **Remember that you don't have to put up with abuse or harassment just because you are a political figure**

Be prepared to 'Mute', 'Block' or 'Unfriend' abusive users from your account or ask them to remove comments. If a comment crosses the line into abuse or harassment you can report this to Facebook or Twitter or even the police.

- **Respond or ignore?**

When faced with an abusive comment give yourself some time to decide whether to respond or ignore it. Trolls often have few followers or few followers of significance – if you reply it can lead to a tit for tat argument fuelling further confrontation and provides the troll with the "oxygen of publicity" or the satisfaction of seeing you riled. Chances are you'll have far more followers than the troll, so if you reply, all of your followers will be aware of the troll's original tweet. Ignoring the comment can lead to short term allegations of dodging an issue but may succeed in the long term.

## Don't feed the troll!

- **Stay calm and polite**

Not every criticism is from a troll – sometimes a frustrated member of the public may be critical or angry with you initially on social media, particularly if they are trying to resolve a council service issue. If you respond constructively, their tone will change and they may even apologise or show you appreciation online.

Bear in mind that for every troll there will be many more legitimate and sensible followers. Think of them when you respond. One approach is to respond with facts only or to refer the troll to a longer factual statement about the situation or a set of “frequently asked questions” that you can post to pre-empt queries. You might want to invite the troll to a public meeting. They may find it harder to be abusive in public. You may also want to remind the troll that you are more than happy to have a political debate in your role as a councillor but that personal comments about you or your family are unacceptable.

**The [Facebook](#) and [Twitter Help Pages](#) have full details about how to block users and how to report abuse**

### **A Criminal Offence?**

If someone sends threatening, abusive or offensive messages they may be committing an offence. If you receive a message which you consider falls into this category, do not respond to it, check out the guidance provided by the [police](#) and [CPS](#) and if appropriate report it.

## 5. Support from the council

A good place to start is to contact your Democratic Services officers and find out what support and training is available

Councillors are generally provided with the ICT equipment that they need to do their job. The Independent Remuneration Panel expects that this will include equipment, support and training.

It is also reasonable to expect that you should have access to social media sites via council ICT equipment to enable you to carry out your councillor role more effectively. You do not need the council to set you up with a personal social media account, but you should take advantage of any training or guidance provided to help you use it properly.

Most councils have a social media policy. You will need to abide by this and any social media protocols that may have been agreed when using your "councillor" account.

It's worth remembering that the council is responsible for any information provided on its website and is subject to legal responsibilities. **You** are personally responsible for the material that you broadcast via your own social media accounts or websites – but more of this later.

Advice will be available to you from a number of council officers. The Monitoring Officer, Head of Democratic Services, the Communications Team and the ICT Manager are likely to have useful advice.

### Using social media in an emergency

During emergencies (such as severe weather events, pollution incidents or major fires) partner agencies such as local authorities, police, health, Natural Resources Wales and fire and rescue services will use social media to provide information to help people prepare, keep them informed and to signpost where they can get help.

It's important during these situations that the most up to date and correct information is communicated to the public and the partner agencies will coordinate the content and timing of the information to be provided.

In an emergency situation, the council will also identify an official spokesperson - an officer or a senior member - who will use the approved information to speak on behalf of the council.

It's always best in these circumstances to restrict your own social media activity to sharing official communications from the partner agencies responding to the situation.

For more information about how your council operates in these circumstances please contact your council's civil contingencies team so that you know what to do in an emergency.

## 6. Social media and council meetings

Your council's social media policy and/or council constitution will provide you with guidance about if and when you can use social media during council meetings. Other than what your constitution or social media policy says, there is no legal reason why you shouldn't use social media during meetings. However, some common sense does need to apply.

Tweeting on meeting progress and receiving comments from the community can be helpful for transparency and engagement BUT excessive use of Twitter may give people the impression that you are not concentrating on the business in hand or are even relying on guidance from outside the meeting. For that reason, it is probably sensible not to use Twitter during a planning or licensing debate. Committee chairs may want to decide how to address this in their meetings and you should abide by the rules set out in your constitution.

Many politicians tweet their contributions or questions to meetings or debates to keep their followers informed of how they're representing their communities' interests. Remember, you may not need to tweet about the detail of a meeting if the meeting is being webcast. Your council may have official" twitter feeds for live on-line conversations to run alongside the meeting webcast.

Remember that you should not tweet or communicate in any way the content of exempt or confidential business dealt with by local authorities in closed session such as when making formal appointments.



## 7. Golden rules

- Think before you tweet or post on Facebook. Do not say anything, post views or opinions that you would not be prepared to:
  - Discuss face to face with the person you are speaking about.
  - Write on a placard and carry down your high street and discuss and defend with anyone who sees it.
  - Be prepared to have minuted in a public meeting – remember, Twitter or Facebook effectively publicly minutes everything for you as you go along!
- Remember that once you have said something it may be seen by millions - friends, supporters, political opponents and the press and could be re-tweeted around the world in minutes.
- Keep your messages professional, polite and positive.
- Remember to try to keep tweets and texts separate – many people tweet comments that they would have texted to someone privately before the advent of social media; this may be about meeting up later (do you want all your followers knowing your plans and gate-crashing your lunch!?) through to 'in' jokes or banter that could be misinterpreted.
- Exercise discretion when choosing who to follow on Twitter or 'befriend' on Facebook, for example, some council employees might find it a bit uncomfortable or inappropriate to have a councillor hanging on their every word. If you follow or are Facebook "friends" with council employees, contractors who have been procured to provide services to the council, a company or member of the public making a planning application or pressure groups, this might be construed as having a close personal association with them and therefore a personal interest.
- If you make a mistake admit it. Mistakes happen so don't try to cover it up as there will always be a record of what you've said.

### Warning

Don't discuss casework on social media or encourage people to contact you about issues that might be personal to them.

Encourage them to use more secure channels.

- Don't tweet or post on Facebook when you are "tired or emotional"! It's probably sensible to turn off your phone at any time when you think your judgement may be impaired. Even if you exercise social media control, other people will still have their smart phones, so may post a photo or video of you 'enjoying yourself'; you need to let your hair down, but it's just one extra thing to consider as a councillor in the age of social media.
- As with your own leaflets or newsletters, ask permission before taking a picture that you intend to use. NEVER take photos of children without the express permission of their parents based on an understanding of what you intend to use the picture for. Your council will have a policy on taking pictures of children, take advice on this before taking or using pictures.
- Do not allow anyone else access to your social media accounts. Protect your passwords and use robust, unique passwords and change them regularly especially if you use a public or shared computer.
- Just like email, you can be hacked on social media! Be wary about direct messages via Twitter, even from people you know, with messages such as 'Hi, have you seen this photo of you on Twitter?' Delete these before opening, as the spam could then be sent to all of the people you are following. Do not open videos or links on, for example, Facebook Messenger if you are not expecting them. It could be a hack.
- If you had a social media account **before you were elected as a councillor**, it may be sensible to review your historical posts through the lens of your new 'political reputation' as well as the expectations of the code of conduct. You may have posted personal photos of social occasions, shared jokes, retweeted videos or made or re-posted political views that you may no longer agree with. If people see such historical posts, it may cause embarrassment or reputational damage not only to yourself but also to the council. It could even be referred to the Ombudsman as a potential breach of the Code of Conduct. Bear in mind that although you posted your comments before you were a councillor, your social media account is essentially still broadcasting them, and they may still be re-posted by other people.

**THINK** before you post; even if you later delete your post, someone may have already taken a screen shot.

**CHECK** before you share or retweet information. Is it true? Who said it and why?

Do you trust the source?

## 8. Keep on the right side of the law...

Councillors new to social media tend to be concerned about the legal implications. It is an important consideration, and some councillors and other politicians have fallen foul of the law, but with careful use and following some ground-rules you will be fine!

The style of communication employed in the social media environment tends to be fast and informal. Messages can appear lightweight and transitory.

Whenever you post something on social media, it becomes a publication, you have effectively made a broadcast. As it is now in the public domain, it is subject to both the **Code of Conduct** and to various **laws**.

### Code of Conduct

If you conduct yourself on Twitter or Facebook as you would in person on the street or in your leaflets, then you will be fine.

Remember that according to guidance from the Ombudsman, the Code of Conduct applies to you whenever you are "Conducting the business of your authority, acting, claiming to act or give the impression you are acting in your official capacity as a member or representative of your authority" Also the Code applies if you "Conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or your authority into disrepute"<sup>7</sup>

If you can be identified as a councillor when you are using social media, either by your account name or how you describe yourself or by what you comment upon and how you comment, the requirements of the Code of Conduct apply. If you say something that could be regarded as bringing your office or authority into disrepute the Code applies even if you are not apparently acting in your official capacity or do not identify yourself as a member.

Remember that the Ombudsman's guidance states that "Making unfair or inaccurate criticism of your authority in a public arena might well be regarded as bringing your authority into disrepute"

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ombudsman.wales/guidance-policies/>

In the same way that you are required to act in council meetings or in your communities you should:

- **Show respect for others** - do not use social media to be rude or disrespectful
- Not disclose confidential information about people or the council
- **Not bully or intimidate others** - repeated negative comments about or to individuals could be interpreted as bullying or intimidation
- Not try to secure a benefit for yourself or a disadvantage for others
- **Abide by the laws of equality** - do not publish anything that might be seen as racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic, anti-faith or offensive to any of the groups with protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010. Even as a joke or "tongue in cheek"

## Predetermination

As a councillor, you are aware that when you act in a quasi-judicial capacity, for example on a planning or licensing committee, you should not make up your mind about an issue that is to be formally decided upon before you had heard all the relevant information. You are allowed to be predisposed to a particular view but not to have gone so far as to have predetermined your position.

It is important to remember therefore, that anything relevant you might have said about particular issues on social media could be used as evidence of your having made up your mind in advance of hearing all the relevant information.

## Don't become a troll yourself!

Social media is a great tool for councillors to challenge and scrutinise, but always think about what you are saying, how you are saying it, how often and about whom. If you are perceived to be too aggressive or too confrontational or too frequent, it could begin to damage your reputation, undermine your relationship with colleagues or you could risk breaching the Code of Conduct in terms of bullying, intimidation or lack of respect for others.

It's therefore not appropriate for you to use social media to criticise your council's officers, who often will not be in a position to defend or respond publicly.

Many councils have apps or member referral services; it is often best to use these mechanisms to request council services or report local concerns as you are likely to receive a resolution to your request.

## Criminal Offences

Don't panic! These generally apply to you already in your conduct as a councillor, but it is worth considering them as they apply to social media:

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

**Data Protection and the General Data Protection Regulation.** - It is illegal to publish personal data about individuals unless they have given you their consent. This might apply to your constituents or service users. As a councillor you are a data controller in your own right and therefore personally responsible for what you publish. Make sure you understand the requirements of the GDPR and Data Protection Act. There is more information about this [here](#).

Contact the Data Protection Officer in your council for more information.

**Incitement** - It is a criminal offence to incite any criminal act.

**Discrimination and Racially Aggravated Offences (or any other protected Characteristic)** - It is a criminal offence to make a discriminatory remark about anyone based on a "Protected Characteristic" as defined in The Equality Act 2010 (such as their race, religion, sexual orientation etc).

**Malicious & Obscene Communications** - It is a criminal offence to send malicious or obscene communications.

### Remember

If you receive a message or someone posts something on your page that you consider to be unsuitable remove it as soon as possible. If you "like" or appear to endorse or retweet a message or image you are regarded as having published it, and will face any legal consequences. It is therefore important to regularly check and moderate any site on which others can post. If you are in any doubt about how to deal with a message you receive, consult your Monitoring Officer.

## Civil Law

This is where things get riskier for anyone who uses Twitter or Facebook, whether they are councillors, members of the public or celebrities:

**Defamation** - It is against the law to make a false statement about someone which damages their personal or professional reputation. **Crucially - even if you simply retweet or pass on information originally posted by others, you may still be held equally as responsible as the original commentator.** This can also apply to publishing images. If found liable to another person, you could be ordered to pay large sums of money as damages.

**Copyright** - The legal ownership of the contents of documents, photos, videos and music belong to the person who created them. You could be in breach of copyright if you reproduce such material without the owner's permission. Always ask for written consent before you use someone else's material.

**Political Comment and Electioneering** - Remember that although it is acceptable to make political points or canvass votes via your own social media accounts this will not be permissible if you are using this via council supplied computer equipment, certainly in the run-up to elections. The Electoral Commission has further information about the return on expenditure that candidates need to provide on advertising or campaign literature.

### **Beware of Fake News!**

Social media is breeding ground for fake news or 'click bait' (where a deliberately salacious headline with a link tries to draw you in, often to a very mundane news item accompanied by lots of pop-up adverts); view all news or gossip with a discerning eye – it could be embarrassing if you retweet or promote fake news and, worse, you could be breaking the law if you circulate false statements about someone, even if you are just retweeting something someone else has posted.

## 9. Further information, interesting sites and sources of help

Bear in mind that information, sites and terminology change quickly. The next big social media platform will soon be on its way. Here are some current examples of information and useful sites but bear in mind that they may be quickly out of date.

### Social Media websites

[Sign up to Twitter here](#)

[Sign up to Facebook here](#)

[Social Media Checklist for Councillors](#) (Local Government Association)

[#FollowMe - A guide to social media for elected members in Scotland](#)  
(Scottish Improvement Service)

[Nextdoor](#) is a social network for neighbourhoods where people who live within the same or neighbouring communities can share information, organise events and take opinion polls. It's a useful platform for members to raise awareness and tap into what is interesting or concerning local residents.

## 10. Links

Here is a list of the links that were used in this guide:

Monmouthshire County Council - [https://twitter.com/Mon\\_CC\\_Scrutiny](https://twitter.com/Mon_CC_Scrutiny)

Swansea Council - <https://twitter.com/SwanseaScrutiny>

'Faces of Swansea Council 2018' Twitter campaign - <https://twitter.com/hashtag/facesofswanseaCouncil2018>

Love the Lagoon - <https://twitter.com/lovethelagoon?lang=en>

'In the Depot' campaign, Torfaen County Borough Council - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6UerjFCLdI>

Naming gritting lorries, BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-42026485>

Public using social media to choose the name 'Boaty McBoatface', BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-36064659>

### Blogs

Caerphilly County Borough Council Leader's blog - <http://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/My-Council/Councillors-and-committees/Leader-s-blog>

Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council Leader's blog - <https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Council/TheLeadersBlog/RhonddaCynonTafCouncilLeadersBlog.aspx>

Denbighshire County Council Chairman blog - <https://denbighshirecouncilchairman.wordpress.com/>

Cllr Peter Black - <http://peterblack.blogspot.com/>

Deputy Lord Mayor of Swansea 2018-19 - <http://swanseamayoralmusing.blogspot.com/>

Cllr Neil Prior - <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/year-county-councillor-surviving-thriving-elected-life-neil-prior/?published=t>

### Councillor Twitter accounts

Cllr Debbie Wilcox - <https://www.twitter.com/LeaderNewport>

Cllr Rob James - <https://twitter.com/CllrRobJames>

Cllr Peter Fox - <https://twitter.com/PeterFox61>

Cllr Julie Fallon - <https://twitter.com/Cllrjuliefallon>

Cllr Saifur Rahaman - <https://twitter.com/CllrSaif>



CLlr Fiona Cross - <https://twitter.com/CLlrFionaCross>  
CLlr Elin Walker Jones - <https://twitter.com/elinmwj>  
CLlr Debbie Wallice - <https://twitter.com/DebbieWallice>  
CLlr Alun Williams - [https://twitter.com/Alun\\_Williams](https://twitter.com/Alun_Williams)  
CLlr Joshua Davies - <https://twitter.com/CLlrJoshuaPlaid>  
CLlr Lisa Mytton - <https://twitter.com/CLlrLisaMytton>

### **Useful organisations' Twitter accounts**

Welsh Local Government Association - <https://www.twitter.com/WelshLGA>  
Local Government Association - <https://www.twitter.com/LGAComms>  
Welsh Government - <https://www.twitter.com/WelshGovernment>  
Local Government Section, Welsh Government - [https://www.twitter.com/WG\\_localgov](https://www.twitter.com/WG_localgov)  
National Assembly for Wales - <https://www.twitter.com/AssemblyWales>  
BBC Wales News - <https://www.twitter.com/BBCWalesNews>

### **Councillor Facebook pages**

CLlr Neil Prior - <https://www.facebook.com/cllrneilprior/>  
CLlr Dhanisha Patel - <http://www.facebook.com/dhanisha4ogmore/>  
CLlr Matthew Dorrance - <https://www.facebook.com/CLlrMatthewDorrance/>  
CLlr Steve Churchman - <https://www.facebook.com/councillorstevechurchman/>

### **Local Authority Facebook pages**

Wrexham Council - <http://www.facebook.com/wrexhamcouncil/>  
Isle of Anglesey County Council - <http://www.facebook.com/IOACC/>  
Snowdonia National Park - <https://en-gb.facebook.com/visitsnowdonia>  
Flintshire County Council - <https://www.facebook.com/Flintshire-County-Council-124912774260207/>  
Vale of Glamorgan Council - <https://www.facebook.com/valeofglamorgancouncil/>

## **Council YouTube pages**

Cardiff Council - <https://www.youtube.com/user/cardiffcouncil/featured>

Conwy County Borough Council - <https://www.youtube.com/user/ConwyWeb>

Gwynedd Council - <https://www.youtube.com/user/CyngorGwynedd>

Monmouthshire County Council -

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZHCKKCI7DqtxDabOkj\\_Esg/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZHCKKCI7DqtxDabOkj_Esg/featured)

Powys County Council - [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCop\\_U-YVW7OB0jRIt3b8f1Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCop_U-YVW7OB0jRIt3b8f1Q)

## **Social media support pages**

Facebook support pages - <https://en-gb.facebook.com/help/tools>

Twitter support pages - <https://help.twitter.com/en/safety-and-security/cyber-bullying-and-online-abuse>

## **Welsh Language**

Welsh Language Commissioner guidelines on using the Welsh language on social media -

<http://www.comisiynyddygydraeg.cymru/hybu/SiteCollectionDocuments/Using%20Welsh%20on%20Social%20Media%20SA.pdf>

## **Guidelines**

WLGA Councillors' Guide to Handling Online Abuse -

<http://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=1504>

Police social media guidelines - <https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/Q770.htm>

Crown Prosecution Service guidelines on social media communications -

[http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a\\_to\\_c/communications\\_sent\\_via\\_social\\_media/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/)

The General Data Protection Regulation - Information for Councillors, WLGA -

<https://www.wlga.wales/gdpr-information-for-councillors>

Local Government Association (LGA) social media guidelines -

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/digital-communications/social-1>

Scottish Improvement Service Social Media guide for elected members -

[http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/elected\\_members/follow-me-guide-to-social-media-for-elected-members.pdf](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/documents/elected_members/follow-me-guide-to-social-media-for-elected-members.pdf)

## **Useful links for social media websites**

Twitter - <https://twitter.com/>

Facebook - <https://en-gb.facebook.com/>

Nextdoor - [https://nextdoor.co.uk/about\\_us/](https://nextdoor.co.uk/about_us/)

WhatsApp - <http://www.whatsapp.com/>

Hootsuite - <https://hootsuite.com/>

Buffer - <https://buffer.com/>

# Councillors Guide to Handling Online Abuse

March 2018



Social media has become a powerful tool for councillors, helping them to engage with communities, raise awareness of community issues, events, or council initiatives and to seek views and receive feedback.

Social media however has its darker side; online abuse and bullying or 'trolling' has reached record levels and politicians, particularly women, are often the target of unacceptable, unpleasant and, sometimes, threatening online abuse.

## **“Abuse of public servants is unacceptable and the online abuse of councillors should not be tolerated”**

The abuse of public servants is unacceptable and the online abuse of councillors should not be tolerated. Councillors are committed individuals who invest a huge amount of time, energy and emotion into serving their communities and the public. Councillors do not often receive thanks or recognition for their efforts, but they should not expect abuse and harassment.

Being a councillor can be a challenging and often vulnerable role. In the era of austerity and cuts to public service funding, the Cabinet Secretary for Local Government Alun Davies AM recently recognised that ‘...the most difficult job in politics in Wales today is that of a councillor’. Councillors often take difficult or controversial decisions, which may affect the communities in which they live; councillors are local, accessible and visible and can therefore be subjected to personal challenge, criticism or, worse, abuse.

Elected politicians in general are increasingly subject to personal abuse and threats; these issues were explored and several recommendations were made in the December 2017 Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life Review into ‘Intimidation in Public Life’.<sup>1</sup>

In February 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May MP announced that the UK Government intends to consult on making it an offence in electoral law to intimidate candidates and campaigners<sup>2</sup>. Politicians will continue to take a personal and collective stand in challenging intimidation, however until a change in law, candidates and politicians will unfortunately have to continue to seek support from colleagues in managing or reporting any abuse.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/666927/6.3637\\_CO\\_v6\\_061217\\_Web3.1\\_2\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/666927/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1_2_.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-standards-in-public-life-6-february-2018>

Online abuse is an unfortunate feature of modern society and it is difficult to prevent in the age of social media. Online abuse is on the increase; the overall number of ‘malicious communications’ recorded by Welsh police forces more than doubled in 2015, to 2,915 reports of cyberbullying, trolling, online harassment and death threats<sup>3</sup>.

Concerns about online abuse of councillors are growing<sup>4</sup> and several councillors who stood down at the 2017 elections did so due to general abuse from members of the public.

**“Challenge and scrutiny is a key part of democratic accountability and should be welcomed; but it should remain constructive and courteous”**

Challenge and scrutiny is a key part of democratic accountability and should be welcomed; but it should remain constructive and courteous. Some residents may feel frustrated about an issue or wish to raise a legitimate complaint; but it should be polite and respectfully raised.

Occasionally such instances can cross the line but can be managed as they are well-intentioned; other instances however can be malicious and vexatious.

Online abuse is sadly likely to be an inevitable downside of being a councillor, so it is important that councillors prepare themselves and consider the steps they can take to manage, minimise and respond to any incidents.

**“Councillors need to be particularly careful about what they post online themselves”**

Councillors need to be particularly careful about what they post online themselves. Councillors are expected to uphold the highest of standards and are subject to a statutory code of conduct. Councillors should therefore ensure that what they say and how they say things online do not cause undue distress or upset to members of the public or other councillors. The WLGA has produced a separate [Social Media Guide for Councillors](#) which outlines the “Dos and Don’ts” of social media and the legal and code of conduct risks (and protection) for councillors.

Some unsympathetically say that politicians should ‘grow a thicker skin’ and whilst it is true that councillors do have to prepare themselves for likely abuse and sometimes the best approach is to ignore it if you can, there are some approaches you can take, social media companies and, ultimately, the law are all on your side.

**“Social media companies and, ultimately, the law are on your side”**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-41729206>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-41263983>

Your response to a particular online post or to a repetitive troll however requires personal judgement, circumstances will vary and each post may require a different response depending on the nature and subject matter of the message, the history of the individual and so on.

This guide provides advice on how to manage or report online abuse or harassment and points you in the direction of online resources<sup>5</sup> which will guide you through the process of blocking, unfriending, muting, hiding or reporting online posts.

In summary, if you don't like a social media comment you might choose to ignore it or challenge it but if a social media comment is libellous, threatening or becomes harassment, you can take action and report it.

If you are concerned about any social media activity, you may wish to seek the advice of your Monitoring Officer in the first instance; should you wish to seek other support you may wish to approach the Head of Democratic Services or other councillors in your group or in your ward.



## Tackling abuse on Twitter™

### 1. “No tit for tat on twitter”

No matter how tempting it might be, entering a ‘tit-for-tat’ debate with a troll is a risky approach. You are unlikely ever to have the ‘last word’ and trolls, like all bullies, seek attention and are looking for a reaction; a response may just fuel them further.

#### “Shall I put you down as a ‘Maybe’ then?”

Humour and sarcasm can sometimes work: one councillor who received unpleasant abuse from a troll during the local elections succeeded in silencing the troll by responding: ‘Shall I put you down as a ‘Maybe’ then?’

Sometimes it can work and it can certainly make you feel better, but it may end up encouraging a more vitriolic and prolonged response and sarcasm does not always translate well on social media, so you may confuse or offend some of your normal followers as a result.

It is also more than likely that you will have many, many more followers than the troll will. Most trolls have few followers and many of them may be sympathetic to the troll's opinions and style. If you do decide to react and reply to a troll's tweet, all your many hundreds or thousands of followers will see the troll's original tweet and you will just help spread the

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<sup>5</sup> Links to resources are embedded in the text but are also included in footnotes, should the reader be using a hard copy version.

troll's abuse, allegations or misinformation on his or her behalf. On balance, it is probably not worth giving the troll the oxygen of publicity.

## **2. Whistling in the wind?**

Check to see if the troll has many followers and who those followers are. As noted above, the chances are that a troll will have few followers. If that's the case, no matter how concerning the comments made it is likely that few people (and few people you care about) will have seen them.

## **3. Your right of reply**

If a troll has posted some inaccurate information about you or the council, you may of course wish to set 'the record straight'. You should balance up the risks and likely success of this approach and, if the information is libellous, you may wish to receive legal advice or follow up through alternative routes.

## **4. Move the tweet into a different domain**

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

## **5. Take a record of the abuse**

If you have received online abuse, even if you are not overly concerned or if you intend to ignore it, you should consider keeping a record should any incidents escalate in the future. You can simply 'screen shot', 'clip' or 'snip' tweets on your phone or computer. You may also decide to warn the troll that you are keeping a record of all messages and may refer them to the appropriate authorities, which may scare them off posting further comments or might encourage them to delete them.

## **6. Dealing with defamation**

In addition to taking a record, if you believe that a tweet defames you (i.e. a false statement that could harm your reputation) there are several options you may wish to take. You may contact the individual initially to request that the tweet be deleted; some individuals may have made a mistake without malice and will remove their post immediately. Depending on the nature of the tweet and the number of followers who may have viewed the tweet, you may wish to seek a correction and/or an apology.

If this approach is unsuccessful or where a defamatory tweet causes serious concern or is part of a concerted campaign, you may wish to issue a 'notice and take-down' letter via your solicitor; although you may not have the intention of proceeding further, the threat of legal action is often a powerful deterrent and can prompt a swift and successful resolution. You may wish to seek informal advice from your Monitoring Officer, but a Monitoring Officer is unlikely to be able to become involved unless the defamer is another elected member (in which case it may be an alleged breach of the Code of Conduct).

## 7. Mute or Block Trolls

You may wish to unfollow, mute or even block a troll or someone who is persistently tweeting you. Guidance about to mute and block is available from Twitter, but in summary:

**Muting**<sup>6</sup> 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.

**Blocking**<sup>7</sup> allows you to restrict specific accounts from contacting you, seeing your Tweets or following you. Unlike muting, trolls 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.

According to Twitter, blocked accounts cannot:

- Follow you
- View your Tweets (unless they report you, and your Tweets mention them)
- Find your Tweets in search when logged in on Twitter
- Send Direct Messages to you
- View your following or followers lists, likes or lists when logged in on Twitter
- View a Moment you've created when logged in on Twitter
- Add your Twitter account to their lists
- Tag you in a photo

## 8. Report the abuse to Twitter

Twitter itself promotes 'Rules' encouraging constructive debate but it explicitly prohibits behaviour '...that crosses the line into abuse, including behaviour that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another user's voice.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20171399>

<sup>7</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/117063>

<sup>8</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/18311?lang=en#>



If tweets are so offensive that you believe they violate Twitter's rules, you can report them to Twitter who may decide to take action. For further information about how to report 'violations' visit Twitter's [How to report violations](#)<sup>9</sup> page.

## 9. Report the abuse to the Police

If someone sends threatening, abusive or offensive messages via any social networking site, they could be committing an offence. The most relevant offences are 'harassment' and 'malicious communications'.

According to the Police, harassment means a 'course of conduct' (i.e. two or more related occurrences) and the messages do not necessarily have to be violent in nature, but must be oppressive and need to have caused some alarm or distress.

An offence relating to malicious communications may be a single incident, but for an offence to have been committed, a message must be indecent, grossly offensive, obscene or threatening or menacing.

The Police advise that you may wish to initially report the matter to Twitter, but if you wish to report either of these alleged offences to your local police force, you should not respond to the message as it may encourage the sender and make the situation worse. The Police also advise that you take a screen shot of the message so if it gets deleted later there will still be a record of what was said.

Further information about social media and criminal offences is available via the [Police](#)<sup>10</sup> and [Crime Prosecution Service](#)<sup>11</sup>

## Tackling abuse on Facebook™

You can take a similar approach to responding to abuse and harassment as you would to Twitter or any other social media platform; you need to weigh up whether it's best to ignore, respond, refer, take legal advice or report any incidents.

That said, Facebook has slightly different '[Community Standards](#)'<sup>12</sup> and alternative methods of dealing with complaints.

<sup>9</sup> <https://support.twitter.com/articles/15789#>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/Q770.htm>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a\\_to\\_c/communications\\_sent\\_via\\_social\\_media/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#attacks-on-public-figures>

You are also more likely to encounter community or campaign groups or pages which facilitate scrutiny of you, fellow councillors or your local council and some have been set up specifically with that purpose in mind. Scrutiny and constructive challenge should be supported, but if these groups are not moderated effectively, they can provide a conduit for abuse and harassment.

Although Facebook encourages respectful behaviour and takes action to protect '[private individuals](#)'<sup>13</sup> from bullying and harassment, it permits 'open and critical discussion of people who are featured in the news or have a large public audience based on their profession or chosen activities' but does take action around 'credible threats' and 'hate speech'<sup>14</sup>.

## Responding to abuse or harassment

There are a range of options for you to manage abuse or harassment on Facebook and full instructions are available on the [Facebook help page](#)<sup>15</sup>:

- If you want a post removed from Facebook, you can ask the person who posted it to remove it.
- If you don't like a story that appears in your News Feed, you can [hide it](#).
- If you are not happy with a post you're tagged in, you can [remove the tag](#).
- You can leave a [conversation](#) at any time, though the other people in the conversation will be notified and you will no longer receive messages from the conversation.
- You can [unfriend](#) or [block](#) another user; they will no longer be able to tag you or see things you post on your timeline.
- If the post goes against Facebook's Community Standards you can report it to Facebook.

## Responding to abuse or harassment in Groups or Pages

Scrutiny and constructive challenge should be supported, although both can provide a conduit for abuse and harassment from individuals or groups if they are not moderated effectively.

Your council may have a policy or tactic on communicating and engaging with such groups, particularly if they have been set up to criticise the council, so you should take advice from the council's communications officers.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#bullying-and-harassment>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#attacks-on-public-figures>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/408955225828742?helpref=search&sr=6&query=unfriend>

There is no right or wrong way with regards responding to a group or page which regularly criticises the council or councillors; some believe that it is beneficial to engage constructively, to explain, inform or signpost and hopefully improve awareness, understanding and support, whilst others are more reluctant as it will require emotional energy and time and the likelihood of successful engagement may be limited.

If you are concerned about comments or postings about you in a group or page, you can [report the post to the Group Administrator](#).<sup>16</sup> If you are concerned about a group that is abusive and you think it has broken Facebook's Community Standards, you can [report the group to Facebook](#).<sup>17</sup>

## **Managing and moderating your own Group or Page**

You may wish to set up your own personal, councillor or community page on Facebook. These are valuable platforms to promote local information, news, events or council developments or seek people's views on community or council proposals.

Members or the community and others can contribute and comment in an interactive manner and whilst most is constructive and uses acceptable language, some individuals may use bad language or 'cross the line' into abuse or harassment.

The use of bad language can sometimes be unintentional and if you are the group or page administrator you can politely rebuke the individual and advise on expected conduct and an apology is often forthcoming.

If you are a Group or Page administrator, Facebook provides you with a range of tools to manage and moderate other people's content or contributions to your Group or Page for more serious breaches of standards.

You can:

- Block certain words or apply a 'profanity filter' in the settings, this will stop such postings appearing in your page;
- Hide or delete comments, photos or tags; and
- Ban or remove someone from your pages.

Useful guidance and instructions are available on the '[Banning and Moderation](#)'<sup>18</sup> section of Facebook.

Administering a large Group can be a lot of work, particularly if group members are active. If that's the case, you might want to share the responsibility with other councillors, friends or

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/436113899837980?helpref=search&sr=1&query=report%20to%20admin>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/266814220000812?helpref=related>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/help/248844142141117/?helpref=hc\\_fnav](https://www.facebook.com/help/248844142141117/?helpref=hc_fnav)

trusted community members. Guidance on making other people administrators or 'moderators is available on [Facebook](#)<sup>19</sup>.

## Tackling abuse on blogs

Blogs are a quick and easy way for members of the public or councillors to set up mini-websites to discuss and air views on matters of interest.

Occasionally, blogs may take an interest in local, community matters and some have been set up specifically to scrutinise the local council or councillors.

Whilst scrutiny is a key part of local democracy and accountability, on occasions, some blogs may make unfair comments or untrue allegations or may include abusive or threatening commentary. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, there are no 'community rules or standards' to moderate or challenge such content.

Depending on the nature of the comments, councillors therefore have several choices:

- Ignore the blog altogether and hope that few people read and become aware of the comments;
- Engage with the blogger and seek to assure, inform or correct the comments as appropriate. As with trolls however, this course of action may fuel and prolong the debate and abusive comments further; or
- If you are concerned that the blogger is harassing you, threatening you, spreading malicious communications or is defaming or libelling you, you may wish to record any evidence (e.g. take some screen shots) and seek further legal advice or refer the matter to the Police.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/148640791872225?helpref=search&sr=3&query=group%20admin>