



Social media – guidance and safety

Leicestershire County Council supports Members to use social media and provides guidance on how to make the most of the channel, manage difficult issues and understand the legal framework.

What is social media?

Websites and apps which enable people to interact in virtual communities are known as 'social media'. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and WhatsApp are the most well-known channels and are platforms where people can share, comment on and interact with content such as videos, short written posts, photos and blogs.

Social media use is growing with latest statistics suggesting that 84 per cent of the UK population have at least one account and spend an average time of two hours and 24 minutes per day on social media.

With audiences increasing, social media is an effective channel for reaching Leicestershire's residents and communities. If members are already using or planning to use social media in connection with their work as a County Councillor, or already using such media in their private capacity, these guidelines may be relevant.

It should be noted that social media is an integral part of the County Council's communication activity and members are encouraged to share posts with their social media contacts.

What is the benefit of using social media?

Social media is an effective way to engage communities, encourage dialogue and gather feedback. It can help to reach people who do not necessarily engage in traditional ways.

It can be used to:

- **Raise your profile** – helping you to fulfil your role as a community leader
- **Increase your accessibility** – for some residents, social media is their preferred channel for contacting people/organisations
- **Cascade a wide range of important information** – including County Council schemes and support, community updates, events, training, Government schemes
- **Push out 'real time' updates during an emergency** – helping residents get help
- **Help quash misinformation and myths** – by amplifying facts

- **Keep up to date with news and key issues** – helping you stay in touch with local, national and international events
- **Share photographs, stories, thoughts, opinions, posts** – sparking conversation and engagement
- **Hear what people are saying about key topics** - taking the temperature of public opinion
- **Encourage positive, polite and constructive debate**

Remember to think about your audience and what they want to hear, as well as the benefit and relevance of posting.

This is a generic guide written for use by all County Councillors - however there will be specific guidance and advice also available from your Group and political party.

Reputation and risk

Social media can pose a risk to reputation, often linked to the issues below:

- Appearing to support an issue or point of view by 'liking' or sharing a post
- Posts remaining public years after they have been posted
- Posting without context/awareness of a wider issue
- Issues snowballing very quickly
- Simple mistakes or posting in haste

Security

Each social media channel has its own terms and conditions and privacy and security settings.

Ensure you:

- Have a strong password
- Set up two-step verification where possible – which links your account to a phone number or email address
- Review what information is visible – and ensure personal information such as date of birth is hidden
- Keep posts free of information useful for anyone up to no good – including holidays, vehicle details, images of friends and/or family and details of any routines
- Have a clear understanding of the location-based information you are sharing and consider turning these notifications off. You can also disable automatic photo and location tagging to prevent other users from revealing your location online

There is also a Member Advisory Note providing advice on Cyber Security on the Elected Member Portal under Learning and Development or via this link [Defending Democracy and Cyber Security Guidance](#).

Legal considerations

There are legal issues to consider:

- Copyright: publishing material e.g. photographs, text from books and publications and music without permission, could result in an award of damages against you. There are a number of websites available which allow uncopyrighted material to be published.
- Defamation: if you publish an untrue statement about a person or an organisation that is damaging to their reputation you may be liable to pay damages
- Harassment: it is an offence to repeatedly pursue a campaign against a person that is likely to cause alarm, harassment or distress
- Data protection: do not publish personal data of other people, including photographs, without their express permission to do so
- Incitement: it is an offence to incite any criminal act
- Discrimination and 'protected characteristics': it is an offence to discriminate against anyone based on protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010)
- Malicious and obscene communications: it is an offence to send malicious or obscene communications
- Online abuse – you can report someone you think has broken a site's rules to the social media channel. In certain circumstances, such as if your personal safety or security is threatened you might need to report a matter to the police.

Members' Code of Conduct and responsibilities as a councillor

The Member Code of Conduct and relevant legislation applies online and in social media:

- If you are referring online in any way to your role as a councillor, you are deemed to be acting in your 'official capacity' and any conduct may fall within the code.
- You can choose to have a social media profile dedicated to your role as County Councillor - but please be advised not to use the County Council logo on your profile, especially if you are expressing views that do not reflect the views of the County Council.
- In any personal online biography, make it clear that the views are yours and may not represent the views of the Council.
- Set out your boundaries and 'rules of engagement' in your account biography – eg. 'I welcome questions via email', 'Abusive content will be removed'
- Be aware of any potential conflict of interest or risk of being perceived as having predetermined a matter, especially when you have decision-making responsibilities. This is most pertinent with regard to planning matters.
- Be mindful of any confidential information that you have been provided with.

- Information must not be posted which will disclose the identity of service users – and photos or videos of service users or their homes must not be posted on social media sites unless the associated permissions have been granted.

Harassment and abuse

Members are reminded that, by putting themselves forward for public office, they should expect to be subject to increased scrutiny and challenge, and sometimes to strong criticism as well. The Member Code of Conduct reminds members that they can express, challenge, criticise and disagree with views, ideas, opinions and policies in a robust but civil manner. The same applies to members of the public, with the same expectation of respectfulness.

When respectful debate turns into harassment, intimidation or abuse, you can report the account to the social media channel which will have rules in place. If you need help, please contact us.

You can also:

- 'Mute' people
- 'Block' people
- Hide posts
- Turn off comments
- Report the matter to the police

An advisory note has been produced about steps you can take to increase your personal safety and is available on the Elected Member Portal under Divisional Matters and Casework, or via this link: [Personal Safety](#).

Members are offered use of the Solo Protect app on their mobile which provides remote access to a 24/7 external monitoring company. If you wish to take up this offer, please contact the Head of Member Services.

Members are also encouraged to report any incidents to either the Director of Law and Governance, Head of Member Services or the Head of Democratic Services.

The council also has an [online reporting form](#) which is also available for Members to use if they so wish. The form guides you through a set of step-by-step questions and once submitted, is sent to the Head of Member Services to action. At the start of the form, please select 'Elected Members' in the box entitled 'Incident Centre and Associated Area'. Any information disclosed on the form will be treated in confidence. It is important that incidents are reported so that the County Council can support you.

Top tips

Here are some tips to help you maximise and manage your social media activity:

Before you respond, think about....

- Will an answer be beneficial? You don't always need to respond
- Have they asked a direct question?
- Is there any wider conversation around the subject?
- Is it better to try and take it offline? i.e. move the conversation from a public channel to a one-to-one rather than discussing so a wider audience can see
- Waiting to see if other people jump in with comments, and the conversation 'self-polices' itself
- Be mindful that, whilst you should avoid getting drawn in to an argument, you will need to make some kind of response to inappropriate comments. If you fail to respond or if you actively engage with the commenter without addressing the offending content, this could be seen to undermine trust and confidence and, at worst, be taken to condone the comments.

Put boundaries in place – you can:

- Delete/hide comments
- Restrict who can comment
- Call out abusive behaviour
- Reinforce zero tolerance policy

Take action

- Report to social media company – and tell people
- Report to the police
- Get advice from the County Council

These practical dos and don'ts also provide more hands-on advice:

Dos	Don'ts
• Use right language for the medium - "you" and "I/we" • Use photographs - and real-life images • Use emojis • Make captions and posts easy to read – UK average reading age is nine • Consider accessibility – alternative text, good colour contrast • Use extra features to engage with your audience – e.g. polls • Like people's comments - respond to positivity	• Post infrequently - or too often • 'Like' a post if... - you don't subscribe to the view • Post image of a leaflet - or print out • Get into a lengthy public conversation in the comments section • Post images without - verbal permission from an adult, or written from a child's parent, and without copyright • Respond to comments - before thinking through

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check the facts and context – before you post | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post if you're tired, distracted, angry or affected by medication, alcohol or drugs – revisit your approach after taking a break |
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Support is available

Support and guidance is available from the council's Democratic and Member Services Team and also from our Communications Unit.

The Local Government Association has also produced some useful guidance which is available via this link: [Practical advice for handling online abuse](#)

Please contact us if you have any questions and if you need advice on managing a challenging or an abusive issue on social media.

For further information please contact:

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