

# Community Council Social Media Guidance

## 1. Introduction

In Scotland, the number of people with social media accounts tops 3.1 million. Increasing numbers of people are using it to get their news, talk to their friends and join in conversations. As key engagement bodies community councils should be looking to make use of social media to engage and have conversations with constituents.

The use of social media can be a force for good and useful tool provided that a set of basic principles are followed. This guidance note sets out hints, tips and guidelines to help community councillors use social media in a positive way and avoid any pitfalls.

## 2. Code of Conduct

The Code is appended to the [Scheme for Community Councils](#) (Schedule 3) and covers matters including objectivity, accountability, respect, general conduct, bullying and harassment.

It is very important to note that the rules of good conduct set out in the Code must be observed in all situations where you are acting or identifiable as a community councillor. You should be mindful that your perception on this may differ to that of a member of the public. Some questions to ask yourself:

- Are you clear about the capacity in which you are acting?
- Are you identifiable as a community councillor?
- Would your conduct bring your position on the community council into disrepute?

Remember that anonymous blogging or social media activity is still considered a breach of the Code. It is not possible to circumvent the Code's provisions by hiding your identity.

## 3. Things to remember

### What goes online tends to stay online

An angry exchange or choice words in the pub can be overlooked and forgotten about. What you post online will stay there and may get shared with many people.

### Professional standards apply online too

If you behave inappropriately at a public meeting, there may be consequences. The same applies online. There may be consequences outwith the community council sphere.

### Remember that community councils exist to listen to and engage with public opinion

There may be occasion when you want to inform people of important information, such as a planning application. You can do so, but don't be drawn into expressing an opinion that isn't reflective of the community council or hasn't been informed by consultation with the community.

### Remember who you are representing

You may be posting under a personal account or a generic community council account, regardless, you should not put anything online that does not represent the account you are posting under.

Generic social media accounts using the community council banner are useful in that they can be used to update on official activities, advertise meetings and signpost to engagement exercises. Be careful not to use such an account for personal use. Having debates, posting controversial material or engaging in non-community council related discussion is inappropriate when using a profile that is supposed to be representative of, and carries the name of, the entire body of which you are a member (even if you are an office bearer). Be careful about making your views known when using such an account unless this is the official position of the community council.

Such activity is better suited to a personal account. This doesn't mean that you aren't still subject to the Code, but it does allow you greater parameters of use.

### Defamation can apply online too

There have been some high-profile examples of politicians defaming rivals online and being successfully sued. A councillor in Wales was forced to pay out £3,000 in damages in 2011. Be careful. If in doubt, don't post.

### You can't control others or the Internet

It may be tempting, but don't think you can control what others are saying. It's a conversation that you can take part in. If somebody is being abusive or aggressive then sometimes it is easiest to switch off and walk away.

### Sometimes people will say nasty things.

This relates to the above. Unfortunately, community councils or councillors can be singled out for abuse. If people criticising have the wrong information, then it may be possible to talk to them but sometimes there is little point in engaging. On most platforms you can choose to completely block these voices from your account. But use this function with great caution as social media communities can be sensitive to what they can see as unwarranted censorship.

### Social media is an addition.

Social media is not the only, but another, channel or way to reach your constituents, your colleagues, the media, the experts and/or the interest groups.

## **4. General tips for posting on social media**

Before you post, ask yourself: 'Would I say this to my boss, a reporter or my mum?' – if the answer is yes then you should be fine. If you hesitate then it's probably best not to post it.

Don't post after you've had a drink...or others could have had a drink. - Some make a point of not posting late on a Friday night, for example, because there may be a few people the worse for wear spoiling for an argument.

Never argue with someone who is argumentative. – This is good advice for life. Social media is full of people who will happily spend all day arguing or that will take a contrarian stance. There is little to be gained from engaging with such people. Remember, you shouldn't be arguing with people at all if you are using a generic community council account.

Pictures and video work well. – People like images so if you can, take a picture or some footage. It's essential to ask for permission of the subjects before posting a picture you've taken.

Utilising information posted by others. – It can sometimes be useful to share something that others have posted in order to signpost to relevant information (i.e. a charity or community event). This can be done by the way of a retweet, a share or a repost and allows you relay important information to a boosted audience.

Be careful where you share controversial viewpoints or those which do not show appropriate respect for the key internal and external stakeholders of the community council. Always err on the side of caution! If you share something that would in itself be a breach of the Code, you yourself will have breached the Code.

Respect privacy. – If someone has approached you or the community council with an issue remember to respect their privacy.

Go to where people are. – In the same way that you pay more attention to the place with the largest audience away from the internet, do so online too. So, by all means attend the town meeting or write a letter to the letters page. But if there's a Facebook group in your community – join it as well.

How often to post. – Post regularly. Three or four times a week on Facebook is about the limit. Three or four times a day on Twitter. But as with any social media site, have a look at what other people are doing.

## **5 Conclusion**

Remember that social media is a tool that can be used to carry out your engagement activities. Used correctly it will allow you to tap into public opinion, promote meetings and gain soundings from often under-represented groups on your community council. Used badly and you may spoil the community council's reputation, personally fall out with people and break the code of conduct. If in doubt consider the tips above and you should be fine.