

Documents which support the Constitution

Part F

Social Media Protocol for Councillors

Introduction

1. All Members of the authority are required to act in accordance with the Member Code of Conduct whilst acting in their official capacity.
2. Blogging and social networking are effective methods for councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors and politics. However it is not always clear whether such activities are covered by the Code of Conduct. This guide is intended to assist members in complying with the Code and ensuring that the use of online media is well received.
3. You should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you must when making statements in person or in writing.
4. You will also need to think about whether you are seen to be, or give the impression that you are acting in your official capacity as a councillor. If you do give the impression that you are acting in your official capacity whilst blogging or using social media, such activity will be caught by the Code.
5. Individual councillors are permitted to have their own official social media sites as Members of Surrey Heath Borough Council but in these they must conform to the protocols of the Council.
6. If you have a private blog you must bear in mind that if you refer to council business in it, you may be viewed as acting in your official capacity.
7. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct, you are requested to observe the following guidelines:

Do

- Consider whether you need to set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- Keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views
- Be aware that the higher your profile as a councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network
- Ensure you use council facilities appropriately; and be aware that any posts you make using Council facilities will be viewed as being made in your official capacity/ and or an inappropriate use of Council resources.
- Be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a councillor, you will be seen as acting in your official capacity

- Make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.

Don't

- Blog in haste.
- Post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- Use council facilities for personal or party political blogs.
- Refer to any information identified by the Council as confidential or exempt in any Social Media Channel

When the Code may apply

8. Bear in mind the Code when you blog or use social networking sites. You should pay particular attention to the following paragraphs of the Code:
 - Disrespect
 - Bullying
 - Disclosure of confidential information
 - Disrepute
 - Misuse of authority resources
9. It is difficult to give definitive advice on the application of the Code as each blog and social networking page is different. The content of a blog or other social networking tool and the circumstances surrounding its creation will determine whether or not it might be covered by the Code.
10. Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. Councillors are encouraged to respect the principles of the Members' Code of Conduct, which can be found at Part 5, Section A of the Constitution. While your conduct may not be a breach of the Code it may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for your office, political party/group and the Council.

Derogatory comments

11. On occasion, councillors might find themselves the subject of offensive or defamatory remarks on other people's blogs or networking sites. The following approach is advised in such circumstances, and applies equally to any form of publication:
 - Pursue a policy of indifference to such remarks, but if you do wish to respond, do not be tempted into retaliation because you may risk breaching the Code. You could ask the blog owner/person making the remarks to remove them from the site.
 - If the person making the comments is a local authority, town or parish councillor, discuss the situation with the Monitoring Officer. It might be the case that the person has

breached the Code by making the remarks, and it could be appropriate to make a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.

- Aside from any possible breaches of the Code of Conduct, the matter is usually deemed private between yourself and the individual. The Council cannot provide legal assistance for pursuit of a claim through the civil courts, but you may decide that you wish to take independent legal advice.

Use of Media Devices during Council Meetings

12. With the exception of meetings of the Planning Applications Committee, the Licensing Sub Committee, Standards Hearing Sub Committees, or the Full Council when considering major planning applications, Members may use media devices for any purpose.
13. At meetings of the Planning Applications Committee, Licensing Sub Committee, Hearing Sub Committees or the Full Council when considering major planning applications, the decision-making Members may only use media devices to access meeting papers and for note taking. Other Members in attendance at these meetings may use media devices for any purpose.
14. At all meetings, during the consideration of exempt items, Members may only use media devices to access meeting papers and for note taking.

Interaction with SHBC social media accounts

15. The Council has its own official social media channels, predominantly on Facebook (www.facebook.com/surreyheath) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/surreyheath). Councillors are encouraged to share those posts onto their own social media accounts, adding accompanying comments if they so wish.
16. Councillors should never disclose exempt information. Councillors should not add extra information beyond that in the social media post/press release as this could potentially compromise the Council, or even result in legal action.
17. Councillors should not add any party political comment in relation to a Council social media post that is advocating support or opposition for any political party or group.
18. Council press releases are written by officers, and express the official Council position as democratically decided, including quotes from the Leader or Portfolio Holder. Related social media posts are not therefore an online debating chamber, and councillors are encouraged (but not compelled) to use their own channels instead.
19. Officers reserve the right to remove any comments (including those by councillors) that may be deemed offensive or abusive in the view of the Monitoring Officer, or other appropriate officer.