

Documents which support the Constitution

Part F

Social Media Protocol for Councillors

Introduction

1. All Councillors of the authority are required to act in accordance with the Councillor Code of Conduct whilst acting in their official capacity. Any Councillor's use of social media platforms may be deemed to be acting in an official capacity if the circumstances would lead a reasonable person to conclude that this is the case. An objective test would apply and, as such, a Councillor's view on the matter is instructive but not conclusive. It is therefore advisable for Councillors to apply the guidance in this protocol at all times when using social media platforms.
2. Blogging and social media 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 Councillors in complying with the Code, promote high standards and ensure that the use of online media is well received.
3. Councillors should reflect carefully on the content and tone of communications and apply the same considerations as communications in person or by email or letter. Acceptable conduct and standards are constantly evolving and Councillors should be mindful of the diversity of views and opinions, particularly on sensitive subjects.
4. Councillors are permitted to have their own official social media sites as Councillors of Surrey Heath Borough Council and should be aware that any communications, on such sites, may be in an official capacity.
5. Councillors are likely to be deemed to be acting in an official capacity if any communications on a private blog relate to council business or could be interpreted as relating to council business..
6. To assist Councillors to comply with the Code of Conduct whilst acting in an official capacity, the following guidelines should be observed:

Do

- Consider whether there is a need to set appropriate privacy settings for a blog or networking site especially for a private, non-political blog.
- Delete any defamatory or obscene posts on any blog or page as soon as possible.
- Be aware that for Councillors that have leadership roles or responsibilities, a greater degree of scrutiny and significance may apply to social media communications; this reflects the Nolan principles embedded in the Code of Conduct, in particular leadership. These principles are set out in Annex 1.

- Councillors should be aware that they will be seen as acting in an official capacity if they publish information on social media platforms that could only have been accessed in their position of Councillor.
- Give due consideration to comments about individuals. Personal comments about individuals may be outside the boundaries of political freedom of speech and expression.

Don't

- Blog in haste.
- Post comments that may be deemed inappropriate if otherwise sent by email or letter or made in person.
- Use council facilities for personal or party political blogs.
- Refer to, or republish, on any social media platform any information identified by the Council as confidential or exempt.

When the Code of Conduct may apply

7. Councillors should pay particular attention to the following values and behaviours identified in the Code:
 - Disrespect
 - Bullying
 - Disclosure of confidential information
 - Disrepute
 - Misuse of authority resources
8. 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.
9. Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. Whilst communications may not be a breach of the Code, they may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for the office of Councillor, political party/group and the Council. The Nolan principles of Leadership and integrity are paramount in all communications with Councillors and promote high standards of conduct. It is expected that Councillors observe these principles at all times when using social media when acting in their capacity as a Councillor.

Derogatory comments

10. On occasion, Councillors might find themselves the subject of offensive or defamatory remarks on other peoples' 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 any response should avoid the temptation to retaliate because this would risk breaching the Code. The blog owner/person could be asked to remove the remarks 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 Councillor 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, 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 seeking independent legal advice may be a consideration.

Use of Media Devices during Council Meetings

11. 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, Councillors may use media devices for any purpose.
12. 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 Councillors may only use media devices to access meeting papers and for note-taking. Other Councillors in attendance at these meetings may use media devices for any purpose.
13. At all meetings, during the consideration of exempt items, Councillors may only use media devices to access meeting papers and for note-taking.

Interaction with the authority's social media accounts

14. 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.
15. Councillors should never disclose exempt information. Councillors should not add extra information beyond that in any social media post/press releases as this could potentially compromise the Council, or even result in legal action.
16. Councillors should not add any party-political comments in relation to a Council social media post that is advocating support or opposition for any political party or group.
17. 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.
18. 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.

Annex 1

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.