

Lichfield District Council

Social media guide for councillors



A revolution is taking place in how we communicate. The world is experiencing the biggest ever change in how information is created and owned, as well as the speed in which it can be shared.

This is changing the way we live, work and even how we speak and think. This guide is for Councillors who would like to use social media as a tool to share information, open new dialogues with the people in their community and beyond, and engage their electorate in productive two-way conversation.

We live in an open, accessible and dynamic communications world. The use of social media will help ensure your voice is heard.

The information in this guide has been extracted from a guide called 'Social Media Guide for Councillors' produced by the Local Government Association (LGA).

Jump to Appendix 1: [Handy media & social media guide for ward councillors](#)

1. What is social media?

Social media is a blanket term applied to a range of online multimedia tools that are used for creating content and two-way communication. They can be accessed via your smartphone, PC, laptop, tablet or smart TV. All social media accounts are free of charge and can be set up quickly and easily from an Internet page. Although this guide will focus on Facebook and Twitter, some useful examples of social media include:

Blogs are like an online diary journal where you can share information. Examples are Wordpress, Blogger, SimpleSite.

Top tip: Share your thoughts and activities, and comment on the issues that mean the most to you. Maintaining a regular blog could make compiling your annual report all the easier.

Micro blogs allow users to share shorter pieces of information. **Twitter** is an example of a micro-blog. Short messages which you post on Twitter are called "Tweets" – they are each limited to 140 characters (letters, numbers and spaces). Tweets are not a private means of communication and can be seen by anyone who is 'following' you. Twitter also has a message facility where you can send messages directly to other Twitter users. However, all such personally directed messages can also be viewed by all of your other followers. You can even forward other Twitter users' Tweets to your own followers, by using the ReTweet function.

Top tip: Follow and be followed. Twitter is a great tool for finding out what is happening, what people think of local and global issues. Listen first and then simply join in the conversation.

Social Networks such as **Facebook** are like having your own small website which can include pictures and text and can provide information and photos. Typically these sites allow you to update people on what you are doing or thinking through a 'status' update and allow you to talk about who you are, what's important to you, what you have done and your plans. You can invite people to be your

'friends' and also set different levels of access to your account, so 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, which encourages further use, and is a useful way of taking a straw poll of your ideas.

LinkedIn is a professional equivalent of Facebook. You can provide information about your career history and skills, and people with whom you are 'linked' can endorse you for particular skills. This is a handy site for finding expertise and keeping up-to-date with business developments in your ward or area.

Flickr, Vimeo, Instagram and **YouTube** are examples of platforms for sharing videos and photographs. Don't forget to seek permission before taking photos to upload to, or copying images from these sites. **Snapchat** is a photo messaging application for photo, video, drawing and text.

Communities of Practice are a way of like-minded people joining a community where they can share knowledge and discuss issues relevant to the Community for example the LGA Knowledge Hub.

2. Why would You Use social media?

Social media will allow you to open new conversations with the people you represent, and the potential for councillors using social media is huge. Your Council will already have official accounts on Twitter and many also have Facebook accounts. Scrutiny Committees may also be using social media to undertake service reviews.

So what are the benefits to councillors of using social media?

- Increasing numbers of people are using Twitter and Facebook, as their preferred method of communication. If you have a presence on these platforms you have the potential to establish two- way communication with all of them.
- 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's an effective way of coordinating campaigns for example, allowing campaign workers access to your Facebook account.
- Social media 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.
- Social media 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" is not necessarily a bad thing, and refers to a mass spreading of a piece of information around the world.

- The local and sometimes national press will follow councillors' on Twitter or Facebook. This means that they 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, to a coffee shop or coffee morning or even in bed.
- 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, accounts cost nothing, 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!

3. How to use social media effectively

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

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.

You might want to consider setting up a separate personal and "professional" account - 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 professional account.

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!

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. Even the messages that you Tweet directly to other people can be viewed by anyone unless you have locked down your account to followers.
- 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

- 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 that 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.
- On Twitter, sign up to Tweety Hall and other sites where councillors can be found by their electorate
- Increase your web presence by linking to other people and sites, leave comments on others' posts and encourage others to link with you. The more you are mentioned, the more people will find you.
- Choose your friends on Facebook and who you would like to follow on Twitter. Bear in mind that people know who follows them and will often follow you in return. Find people on Twitter with links to your community, county or region by searching using the 'hashtag' (#) symbol to prefix your searchterm for example #Lichfield_DC
- Be disciplined about making time available to write new content and answer your "friends" and "followers"; a regular time each week to update your Facebook status and throughout the day to check Twitter.
- 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 Twitter is only 140 characters and tends to be more instant and timely. You could also post regular updates on council policies and actions of interest to your community, links and re-tweets of other relevant national activities or issues on which you would like feedback. You can also use Twitter or Facebook to raise the profile of events and public meetings.

Remember 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.

4. Etiquette and style

- 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!
- Avoid being ironic or sarcastic, it can be misinterpreted.
- On Facebook, you will need to monitor and, if necessary, censor the contributions that other people make to your site; delete them if they do not match your required standards of behaviour or language. Defamatory and offensive language will be attributed to the publisher 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.

- On Twitter, you can block people who are habitually offensive or vexatious. Remember however, blocking them only stops them engaging directly with you, their tweets will continue to be public to all of their followers.
- Bear in mind that constituents may find party political point scoring tedious and prefer to hear information about what you are achieving.
- 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.

5. Support from the council

Lichfield District Council is not able to help you to set up social media accounts, but if you would like a quick one-to-one overview session on social media we can provide this. Just email elizabeth.thatcher@lichfielddc.gov.uk

We have a media & social media protocol that covers the use of social media and you need to make sure you read and abide by this.

An extract from the media protocol is copied at the end of this document and contains handy do's and don'ts. A full copy of the media & social media protocol can be downloaded from the members online section of the intranet (Brian).

It's worth remembering that **you** are personally responsible for the material that you broadcast via your own social media accounts or websites, so we recommend you read the protocol and guidance provided before you begin.

If you have any questions, please email the communications team - either elizabeth.thatcher@lichfielddc.gov.uk or esther.epstein@lichfielddc.gov.uk

6. Social media and council meetings

Recently, especially with the advent of webcasting there has been an increase in interest in the use of Twitter in council meetings. Clearly you will need to be guided by the Members' Code of Conduct when tweeting from council meetings. Common sense is also vital. Here's some top tips:

- 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 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.

- 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 previously have texted someone privately; this may be about meeting up later (do you want all your followers knowing your plans and gatecrashing your lunch!?) through to ‘in’ jokes that could be misinterpreted.
- Don’t follow an individual unless you know them or have a good reason for doing so. Some people, such as constituents or council employees, might find it a bit uncomfortable to have their local councillor hanging on their every word.
- 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.
- Don’t enter into unhelpful online arguments; remember all of your followers or friends will be witnessing this online.
- Ignore people or block them if they persist in vexatious comments.
- Don’t tweet or post on Facebook when you are “tired” it’s probably sensible to turn off your phone at any time when you think your judgement may be impaired.
- Bear in mind that it is possible for your followers and friends to be seen. 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.

- As with your own leaflets or newsletters, always 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.
- Do not allow anyone else access to your social media accounts, protect your passwords, especially if you use a public computer.
- Just like email, you can get spam in 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.

8. Possible pitfalls and how to avoid them

Time and commitment

Maintaining your social media accounts can take time. Many people start enthusiastically and then allow their accounts to lie fallow. This is risky as friends and followers may think that you are inactive or, worse, unresponsive. To avoid this:

- Only set up accounts that you can manage, choose either Twitter or Facebook if necessary. It is possible to set up links between the two which will save you duplicating information.
- Set time aside regularly for updates and get used to communicating 'on the hoof'.

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"

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

- **Show respect for others** - do not use social media to be rude or disrespectful
- **Do not disclose confidential information about people or the council**
- **Never bully or intimidate others** - repeated negative comments about or to individuals could be interpreted as bullying or intimidation
- **Do 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 or anti faith. 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.
- **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** - It is illegal to publish personal data about individuals unless they have given you their permission. 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.
 - **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 (such as their race, religion, sexual orientation etc).
 - **Malicious & Obscene Communications** - It is a criminal offence to send malicious or obscene communications.
- **Civil Law** This is where things get more risky 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. There have been famous cases of damages being paid as a result of twitter defamation/libel – including the Sally Bercow case.
- **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.

10. Further information, interesting sites and sources of help

Bear in mind that information, sites and terminology change quickly. Facebook is already reporting a drop in users. However, 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.

Sign on to **Twitter** here <https://twitter.com/>

Sign up to **Facebook** here <https://en-gb.facebook.com/>

Tweety Hall. A platform that gathers all the Councillors that have Twitter accounts in the UK together so that all their posts can be read in one place and the public can easily find their local councillor. All you have to do to join them is send them a Tweet.

<http://tweetyhall.co.uk/>

Twenty-first century councillors <http://socialmedia.21st.cc/> Useful guidance for members using social media. <http://kindofdigital.com/> An online innovation agency helping organisations engage online with citizens, communities and stakeholders. Has useful examples of social media guidance.

LGA's Knowledge Hub is an example of a community of practice. This one was set up specifically for people working in and with local government and has online fora, libraries full of materials and details of events. <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk>

Social Media and Online Collaboration Community. Join this Community of the Knowledge Hub to talk to other councillors and officers working with Social Media.

11. Glossary

Blog Term derived from Weblog i.e an internet log or diary

Blogsphere All the Blogs on the Internet

Community of Practice Group of people who are members of an online 'club' because they have a role or an interest in an area of work

Direct Message A message sent via Twitter to someone who follows you or who you follow.

Facebook An example of social networking

Flickr Photo sharing site

Follower Someone who has chosen to follow you on Twitter

Friend Someone who you have allowed to access your Facebook page. Not necessarily a real friend.

Forum A virtual discussion area

#Hashtag A hashtag or # is a way of denoting a keyword which can be used as a search term on Twitter.

Instagram A platform for sharing photos and videos

Instant Messaging A conversation with one other person via for example Microsoft Live Messenger or Yahoo Messenger. A conversation which, if you indicate that you are available for a chat is more immediate than e mail and easier to type than a text

Microblog Short blog e.g. Twitter using a maximum of 140 characters

Pintrest A virtual pinboard for creating and sharing images

RebelMouse A free service that connects to your accounts at services such as Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram. It integrates all your SM Tweets, postings and blogs automatically into one page, boosting your SM presence without you doing anything extra as it 'runs in the background'.

Retweet To forward a Tweet received on Twitter **RSS feeds or Really Simple**

Syndication feeds Messages from websites informing you that new information is available so that you don't have to keep checking the website for updates

Social bookmarking A way of saving and sharing all your favourite sites on the web

Social networking Facebook etc

Snapchat A photo messaging application for photos, videos, drawings and text

Spam Electronic junk mail

Trending Current popular people or conversations as in trending on Twitter now...

Troll Someone who disrupts online communities or discussions through unhelpful or irrelevant posts

Tweet A message sent on Twitter

Tweety Hall A virtual gathering place for councillors with Twitter accounts

Twitter An example of microblogging

Vimeo A platform for sharing videos and photographs

Wiki A tool which enables anyone to add or edit content on a website

Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia which works using this method and is therefore not always accurate

You Tube A platform for sharing videos and photographs

Handy media & social media guide for ward councillors

Extracted from Lichfield District Council's Media & Social Media Protocol. June 2015. Download a full copy of the Media & Social Media Protocol from the members' online section of the intranet (Brian)

You may

- If you are approached for a comment by the press and are not sure how to respond or what the facts are, **we would recommend** you speak to your group leader, cabinet member or relevant senior officer.
- You can also ask the journalist to contact the communications team (01543 308778 or email esther.epstein@lichfielddc.gov.uk) who can direct the enquiry to the best place, in line with the media protocol.
- As a ward councillor, you **may** issue media releases or statements to the press (or social media posts) that represent your views as a ward councillor. You must ensure that any releases (or posts) you issue do not imply they represent the views of/are sent on behalf of the whole council and that they do not make promises on behalf of the council – and are not compiled using council staff time or physical resources¹. Examples could be personal profiles, comments on issues in your ward, or promotion of events taking place in their ward.
- When contacting the media, you **must always** state in what capacity you are speaking to the media and what your role is in relation to the issue in question – for example in your role as a ward councillor. Your social media profiles must also clearly state your role.
- **The same restrictions apply to social media. To find out more about social media do's and don'ts visit the members online section of the intranet (Brian).**
- You have a duty to understand the restrictions placed on you under the Members' Code of Conduct and in relation to the law as it applies to local government communication (both in relation to the media and when using social media).

You must not

- You **must not** issue media releases (or social media posts) that claim to speak on behalf of the whole council. All council wide media releases are issued by the communications team in line with the media protocol.
- You **must not** make promises to any media outlet (or on social media) about what the council's communications officers will, or won't, do. In particular, you must not promise editorial exclusivity or suggest the council will, or won't advertise in a particular publication.
- You **must not** provide confidential information obtained in your role as a councillor to the media (or on social media).
- You **must not** provide inaccurate or misleading information to the media (or on social media). When making comments (or when on social media), you are advised to check the accuracy of information with the relevant senior officer or cabinet member first.
- **The same restrictions apply to social media. To find out more about social media do's and don'ts visit the members online section of the intranet (Brian).**

Important information for members of the planning/licensing committees

- As a member of the planning or licensing committee you will receive full training on pre-determination. With regards to how this applies to the press/media and social media, you must not comment on an application that has not yet been considered at committee, if you wish to vote on the application.
- This is because, should you give the impression publicly that you have already decided or 'pre-determined' your vote/the outcome of the application, you would be required to not take part in the voting process.
- **The same restrictions apply to social media. To find out more about social media do's and don'ts visit the members online section of the intranet (Brian).**

Liaising with the communications team

- You **must not** try to persuade communications officers to support you in your political objectives. Officers are employed to carry out the work of the council and to implement the decisions it takes. They cannot support members in a political capacity or help to deliver political ambitions.
- You **must not** instruct communications officers to issue media releases on your behalf. You may, however, alert communications officers to particular events or developments that may require media coverage. It will then be down to the communications team to determine whether it is appropriate for the council's communications team to get involved.

Any questions

Email the communications team - either elizabeth.thatcher@lichfielddc.gov.uk or esther.epstein@lichfielddc.gov.uk

ⁱ You may use your council laptop to prepare and issue press releases, statements and social media posts at normal times. You may however not use them during the Purdah period in the run up to an election for campaigning purposes. Please see Appendix 3 of the full media and social media protocol for further information.