

## **Guide to Blogging and Social Networking**

This guide is intended for use by all local authority, parish and town councillors in Herefordshire.

1. 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.
2. Standards for England supports the use of such media and encourages councillors to get online. 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.
3. 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.
4. Many councils do not provide a specific site in which councillors can write blogs. Individual councillors are permitted to write their own official blogs as councillors, however, and under this circumstance, they will only be permitted to act in their official capacity, and not in their private capacity. Councillors must also bear in mind that if they do have private blogs and refer to council business on them, they will be viewed as acting in their official capacity.
5. To make sure you comply with your Code of Conduct (the Code) and to ensure your use of online media is well received, you are requested to observe the following guidelines:

### **Do**

- 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 will be viewed as made in your official capacity
- 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
- be careful if you choose to make political points, and 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 political blogs.

## When the Code may apply

6. 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
7. However, 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.
8. Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. Councillors are encouraged to respect the **Ten General Principles of Public Life**, which can be found in Herefordshire Council's Constitution as the preamble to the Members' Code of Conduct. 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 and authority.

## Derogatory comments

9. 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, and do not be tempted into retaliation because you may risk breaching the Code. You could ask the 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 Standards Committee.
  - 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.
  - If a person had a blog or a social networking site, and a second person places comments about you on that site, you could ask the person to remove the second person's comments from their site.