

Public Report  
Standards and Ethics Committee

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**Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting**

Standards and Ethics Committee – 30 January 2020

**Report Title**

Social Media Guidance

**Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?**

No

**Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report**

N/A

**Report Author(s)**

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**Ward(s) Affected**

Borough-Wide

**Report Summary**

A report providing brief guidance as to the use of Social Media in compliance with the Code of Conduct

**Recommendations**

1. That the Committee notes the content of the report.
2. That the Monitoring Officer organises appropriate Social Media training for members.
3. That the Monitoring Officer issues guidance to Members on their use of Social Media via the Members Update, based on the content of this report.

**List of Appendices Included**

None

**Background Papers**

None

**Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel**

None

**Council Approval Required**

No

**Exempt from the Press and Public**

No

## **Social Media Guidance**

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 The increased use of social media presents a potentially important and useful way for Councillors to engage with their constituents. This new media is useful for informing constituents about local issues and what action elected members are taking in relation to such matters. This type of communication can increase the profile of local democracy and politicians, and potentially help to engage different demographic groups into local politics. However it also brings additional risks for members around the way in which they express themselves.
- 1.2 Social media platforms are much more instant than traditional forms of communication and often users do not identify themselves. This can lead to “knee-jerk” reactions and responses, and ill-advised and ill judged exchanges.
- 1.3 As such members need to be careful in the way they express themselves, where there is any suggestion that they are communicating in an official rather than a private capacity. Communications on social media are more likely to be viewed as having been made in an official capacity where the member identifies themselves as a Councillor, where they refer to information known to them by means of them being an elected member, or where they refer directly to council business as opposed to wider political issues.
- 1.3 When comments are made as set out above and are therefore made in an official capacity, those comments will be subject to the usual requirements of the Code of Conduct. The use of a disclaimer on social media will not necessarily mean that communications fall outside the scope of the code of conduct.
- 1.4 Further guidance as to the use of social media by members is set out in the publication by the Local Government Association entitled “Councillor’s Guide to Handling Intimidation” the relevant part of which guidance is reproduced at Appendix 1. This document refers to the benefits of engaging in social media, the risks in terms of standards and ethics, and also online safety.
- 1.5 The recent report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in respect of Local Government Ethical Standards made a recommendation that “The scope of the code of conduct should also be widened, with a rebuttable presumption that a councillor’s public behaviour, including comments made on publicly accessible social media, is in their official capacity. This would require that Section 27(2) of the Localism Act 2011 be amended to permit local authorities to presume so when deciding upon code of conduct breaches.” As such if this change is made to the legislation, members will need to be even more careful as to all of their communications on social media. If any

such changes to the legislation are made, clearly it will be incumbent upon the Committee and the Monitoring Officer to make members aware of this and any potential implications.

- 1.5 Further it is the intention of the Monitoring Officer that training is to be provided in relation to the use of Social Media in compliance with the Code of Conduct. This training will also incorporate input from the Communications team in respect of good practice when using Social Media.

## **2. Key Issues**

- 2.1 That members are aware of the requirement when using Social Media to comply with the Code of Conduct as set out above.

## **3. Options considered and recommended proposal**

- 3.1 Recommendations have been referred to above.

## **4. Consultation on Proposal**

- 4.1 N/A

## **5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

- 5.1 N/A

## **6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications**

- 6.1 Any work undertaken by Legal Services in dealing with this matter is within the budget for Legal Services.

## **7. Legal Advice and Implications**

- 7.1 The Council and the Standards and Ethics Committee have a statutory duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. The information set out in this report re-iterates that members should comply with the Code of Conduct when using Social Media, thereby contributing to the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct.

## **8. Human Resources Advice and Implications**

- 8.1 None.

## **9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults**

- 9.1 None.

## **10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications**

10.1 None

**11. Implications for Partners**

11.1 None.

**12. Risks and Mitigation**

12.1 There is a risk that if members are not aware of the requirements to comply with the Code of Conduct when using Social Media, further complaints will be received by the Standards and Ethics Committee.

**13. Accountable Officer(s)**

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