

# Warwickshire County Council Corporate Social Media Policy and Guidelines

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# Social Media Policy

## Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to ensure the council's social media activity is safe, appropriate, purposeful and legal. Specifically:

- to minimise the reputational, legal and governance risks to the council and its employees arising from the use of social media by staff in a professional capacity,
- to enable elected Members and all members of staff, including volunteers, contractors and consultants, to understand their responsibilities when using social media,
- to ensure a consistent approach is applied across the council, focused on achieving business objectives and improving customer satisfaction.

This policy will cover the purpose of social media at the council, the benefits and risks that it brings and the corporate principles of engaging in this way. The accompanying guidance will include how the council will manage and use social media to meet corporate objectives, share best practice and outline expected behaviours of staff. Further guidance documents are included as appendices which provide specific guidance and direction for both the Fire and Rescue Service and elected Members, each focusing on their target audiences, services and specific needs.

## Introduction

Social media is the collective term for a set of online tools, channels and interactive media that enable users to interact with others in various ways, including sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests. Social media involves building online communities and/or networks which encourage participation and dialogue.

Social media includes a range of channels such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Yammer, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, Next Door, WhatsApp, blogs and other forums. They enable the sharing of user-generated content and typically rely more heavily on multi-media (videos, images etc) than more traditional channels.

Social media is one route used by the council to communicate with the public. It enables us to be more active and engaged in our relationships with residents, partners and stakeholders. It is a key part of our organisational commitment to improve our digital presence.

The ability for anybody to instantly publish to the world brings with it professional responsibilities that all council employees need to understand.

## Context

This policy establishes a corporate approach, standards and guidance on the use of social media and helps to manage risks around social media usage. These include:

- damage to the council’s reputation,
- civil or criminal actions relating to breaches of the law,
- disclosure of personal and/or confidential information/breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal data,
- bullying or trolling.

## Scope of the policy

This policy is designed to cover work-related use of social media, including:

- the council’s use of social media as a communications channel where the content, information or services are being provided by or accessed, or on behalf of, the council,
- participation on social media channels not managed by the council where contributions are posted directly in a professional capacity (for example, contributing to a professional forum) or by someone who identifies themselves as an employee, Member or any other person employed or contracted by the council or working on the council’s behalf.

This policy does not cover personal use of social media by employees, Members or other representatives of the council. This is covered separately by the following council policies and Code of Conduct:

- [Employer and Employee Responsibilities](#)
- [Email, Internet and Social Media Policy](#)
- [Code of Conduct for Members.](#)

While you can refer to your WCC role on your personal social media accounts, you should avoid direct reference to your job title in such a way as to appear to be speaking in that capacity. Personal accounts are not an appropriate channel for making statements on behalf of WCC.

## Principles and commitments

- The council will use social media in a safe, appropriate and purposeful way to engage and interact with residents, stakeholders, partners, opinion formers, the media and employees in support of the council’s Strategic and Recovery Plans.
- The council will abide by any relevant or applicable laws, terms and conditions.
- Use of social media will always be consistent with the council’s duty to safeguard children, young people and vulnerable adults, in accordance with relevant statutory requirements and service specific protocols.
- Employees using social media for business purposes must maintain political neutrality and not share individual political opinions.
- Council social media accounts will only be authorised by the Digital Standards Working Group and will be monitored by the Social Media Development Group.
- Employees must act in accordance with the law and be aware of the risk of legal action against them individually and the council as an employer if social media is used inappropriately. Any employee found to have breached this policy may be subject to the council’s [Disciplinary Procedure](#) which could result in dismissal.

## Responsibilities

- Employees are responsible for upholding this policy and promptly reporting any misuse, concerns or anything that has gone wrong to their line manager. They are responsible for ensuring personal or sensitive information that is volunteered by the public is handled in line with the council's [Code of Practice for Confidential or Personal Information](#). They are also responsible for adhering to the council's [Information Management Framework](#) and operating within the boundaries of Data Protection legislation and the council's [Data Protection policies and procedures](#).
- Any potential data breaches must be reported as soon as possible and within 4 hours, using the council's [Data Breach Hotline and Reporting Procedure](#).
- A [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) should be considered as part of the process of requesting a new social media account, especially if its purpose means personal information may be collected.
- Line managers are responsible for ensuring their employees are aware of these policies and that they act in accordance with them.
- The council's HR service will maintain relevant HR policies and guidance and provide advice to managers on any individual performance or conduct issues relating to the appropriate use of social media.
- The council's Marketing and Communications service will maintain the Social Media Policy and guidelines.
- The council's Marketing and Communications service will maintain a register of all authorised social media accounts. All corporate accounts will be accessed and monitored by this service.
- The council's Marketing and Communications service will co-ordinate the council's corporate social media accounts on the most relevant channels. This includes providing access to services to deal directly with customer contact and/or other communication messages as needed.
- The council's Marketing and Communications service will provide initial advice and guidance where there are any reputational issues on social media.
- The council's Marketing and Communications service will use tools to appropriately monitor social media use and interaction for the purposes of brand and reputation management and gaining information and customer insight to inform improvement to Council communications or services.
- The Digital Standards Working Group will be responsible for assessing and approving requests for new social media accounts.
- The Marketing and Communications team will develop the council's strategic approach to social media, with the Social Media User Group existing to share best practice and support account managers with topic-based learning and development.

## Breach of policy

This policy exists to protect the council and ensure the best outcomes from any corporate use of social media. If you believe this policy has been breached or that anything has gone wrong, you should speak with your line manager immediately.

Staff found to be in breach of this policy and guidelines may be disciplined in accordance with the [Disciplinary Procedure](#). In certain circumstances, breach of this policy may be considered (gross) misconduct resulting in dismissal.

Councillors found to be in breach of this policy may be deemed to be in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct leading to action by the Standards Committee.

# Appendix A: General guidelines for using social media

## 1. Introduction

These guidelines for all employees and members should be read in conjunction with the council's Social Media Policy.

The purpose of these guidelines is to cover the practicalities of using social media to uphold the Policy. It covers the standards expected in relation to work-related use of social media.

## 2. Setting up new social media accounts

All requests for new corporate social media accounts or closed groups should be made using the [Request for New Social Media Account Form 2021](#) and forwarded to the Marketing and Communications team via [newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk). This form encourages the user to consider the business case, the resource implications, the choice of channel(s) and how the activity will align with business objectives and form part of your wider communications and marketing strategy. In some cases, a [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) will also be needed.

The request will then be considered by the Digital Standards Working Group. Corporate social media accounts are not permitted without the authorisation of this group.

To ensure council social media accounts are branded consistently, have a clear purpose and add value to the council's reputation:

- any new account should be linked to a service or a department, not a temporary campaign or project.
- Marketing and Communications will advise on standard templates and supply profile pictures, cover photos and additional information to be stored on your account.

## 3. Managing your account

- All administrators or users should have read the WCC policy and guidelines and received social media training from the Marketing and Communications team.
- Appropriate steps should be taken to ensure that the Marketing and Communications team are able to access the account in cases of emergency or staff absence; for example, setting up [newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk) as an additional account administrator or sharing generic usernames and passwords.
- All corporate accounts will be subject to ongoing review and an annual audit to ensure they are being used regularly and following the principles of the Social Media Policy. Where accounts are found to be dormant or in breach of those guidelines, steps will be taken to close them down.
- Every account or page should have a primary contact who is responsible for the administration and security of the account.

- Check your account at least once a day, including over weekends and holidays. User comments should be responded to in a timely way.
- If your account is dormant, no longer viable or not needed, it should be removed. Leaving it visibly dormant can often cause confusion and doesn't reflect well on the council.
- If you are managing an online community, such as a group, page or discussion forum, ensure you publish your House Rules (see section 7) in a prominent place and apply these fairly and consistently.

## 4. Corporate responsibilities

The use of social media carries a range of responsibilities on those managing the accounts and content. These key guidance points must be followed in all cases.

### **You must not:**

- Post commentary, content or images that may be considered to be defamatory, discriminatory, proprietary, threatening, bullying or intimidating.
- Post anything that may create a legal liability for the council, bring the council into potential or actual dispute or create a hostile work environment. In these circumstances the council may take disciplinary action in accordance with the [Disciplinary Procedure](#).
- Share photos or video content of individuals, or personally identifiable information about an individual, without their prior consent (see section 4.2 for more information). Staff must adhere to the council's [Information Management Framework](#) and the council's [Data Protection policies and procedures](#). Doing otherwise could lead to investigation and enforcement by the Information Commissioner's Office.
- Disclose an individual's personal contact details or any personal or sensitive information. This applies equally to Facebook closed groups; while these may be perceived as more secure, it is essentially an open platform. If personal or sensitive information is volunteered by a member of the public, this should be handled in line with the [Council's Code of Practice for Confidential or Personal Information](#). Any personally identifiable information which is inappropriately or accidentally shared may be considered a data breach and must be reported as soon as possible and within four hours, using the council's [Data Breach Reporting Procedure](#)
- Publish or share any information that is confidential to the council. If in doubt, check with your line manager, Information Governance or the Marketing and Communications team.
- Engage in trolling; that is, starting or pursuing arguments online with the intention of disrupting normal discussions within that community.
- Represent yourself or the council in a misleading way. All statements must be true, not misleading and any claims should be substantiated.
- Use the corporate social media accounts for the promotion of personal, financial or commercial interests.
- Use the corporate social media accounts for party political purposes or specific party-political campaigning purposes (Local Government Act 1986).
- Share political opinion, content posted by political parties or politicians or updates on matters which are politically controversial during the pre-election period.

**You must:**

- Show respect for other individuals and organisations, including the council, its partners, officers, staff and Members in line with the [Bullying and Harassment Policy and Procedure](#).
- Ensure that your account activity complies with the specific privacy notices to each social media platform.
- Subject Access Requests received via a council social media platform relating to personal data held by Warwickshire County Council should be directed to the standard [Subject Access Request procedures](#) and responded to within one month. (Please note however that Subject Access Requests for personal data held on social media will be the responsibility of each individual social media platform.)
- Report any concerns about the safeguarding of children, young people or vulnerable adults to your line manager in the first instance.
- Report any threats or safety concerns to your line manager in the first instance.
- Ensure that you have permission to share images or text from a copyrighted source. If you need advice, please contact the Marketing and Communications team.
- Respond appropriately to Freedom of Information Requests (see below).
- Behave according to the [E-mail, Internet and Social Media Policy](#).

#### **4.1 Freedom of Information requests**

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 give everyone the right to request written or recorded information held by Warwickshire County Council. These requests may be made through any Council social media site, either publicly or via a private/direct message. The public don't always make it clear when they request information whether they are wanting to make a Freedom of Information (FOI) request or not, so if you are unsure, please ask the customer whether they want their question to be considered under the FOI Act and then handle it accordingly.

FOI requests must be responded to within 20 working days. If such a request is received (or if you are unsure if a request falls under a FOI), please forward to [inforights@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:inforights@warwickshire.gov.uk) as soon as possible. Remember to update the customer, either publicly or by private/direct message, thanking them for making the request and updating them on next steps.

#### **4.2 Use of identifiable photos and videos**

Both members of the public and WCC staff have a right to request that their image is not used on social media.

Therefore, for any photos or videos that include identifiable members of the public and appear on a council social media account, you must have consent. For children and vulnerable adults, you must have written consent from the appropriate person. Photos should not contain any data that can be used to identify an individual (for example, a car number plate). Consent can be withdrawn at any time and a person can request that their personal information be removed from the Council social media account.



## 5. Best practice – general guidelines

Acceptable behaviour on social media is more than just being respectful to others. It includes specific channel behaviours such as abbreviations, hashtags and sharing other user's content. So while there are some principles of best practice outlined here, account managers should also use tools to enhance your message, build your service reputation in your chosen channel and create engagement. You should also follow the adopted etiquette techniques for your chosen platforms, which are likely to be continuously evolving.

One of the key reasons to have a council social media account is to add value to residents. By adding value, we can help people to find the information they need quicker, empower residents to help themselves, build trust between communities and the council and efficiently answer service-related questions. The following best practice guidelines are based on this principle.

- Social media is a conversation between the council and one or more members of the public. Show that you are listening by acknowledging both compliments and criticisms. The tone of voice used should be friendly, conversational and engaging. We should be polite, open and respectful as well as being honest and helpful. We must never judge, assume or guess.
- Be clear, credible and consistent – be accurate, avoid jargon, abbreviations and slang, but respond in a reasonably concise way. If the answer to a question is long or complex, try to move the conversation onto email or a direct message. Acknowledge both compliments and constructive criticism and ensure your responses are consistent with the Council's other communications.
- Be responsive – respond to questions, ideally in a timely way. Offer insights where appropriate, share links to further resources and connect with other accounts or individuals if they are better placed to help. If you don't know the answer to a question, find out who does. Never be afraid to say "I don't know, let me find out for you", especially if finding the answer is likely to cause a delay in response<sup>1</sup>.
- Optimise content – better content leads to higher engagement. Make use of images, video and GIFs where appropriate and ensure your content is appropriate to each particular platform. Appropriate use of hashtags is also useful to attract new audiences to your account and to show that your content is part of a wider campaign or awareness day.
- Publish a range of posts, not just ones that advertise your services. These could include job vacancies, community or industry news, reposts from related accounts, blog posts and good news stories from your service area.
- Personalise the messages. The council is not just an organisation, it is a group of people and social media is an appropriate place to show this. If it's appropriate, personalise your messages with your first name or initials. It helps to build that feeling of personal conversation as well as accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> [This article](#) has additional guidance on how to respond to different types of messages or comments on your social media account.

- Include useful links, especially if you want your audience to do something as a result of your post (for example, click here, read more, please share).

## 6. Best practice - accessibility

As social media administrators, it is our responsibility to ensure that our content is accessible and inclusive. Given that 15% of the world's population experiences some sort of disability, this is the only way we can ensure that we connect with our full potential audience. Keeping social media accessible means recognising exclusion, learning from our followers and presenting information in the clearest way possible.

The following will help to keep your social media account inclusive.

- Make text accessible to all, including those using screen readers, those learning English as a second language or those with learning disabilities.
- Write in plain language, don't overuse capitals and capitalize the first letter of each word in hashtags to make them more legible.
- Put hashtags and mentions at the end, so they don't interrupt content from screen readers.
- When using hashtags, ensure that each word uses a capital letter so that they are read in the correct way by screen readers. For example, #BestWarwickshire (not #bestwarwickshire).
- Replace 'click here' with more descriptive call-to-actions like 'sign up', 'try it for free' or 'subscribe'.
- Use an adequate font size, especially over images.
- Avoid special characters.
- Limit line length.
- Use inclusive language such as gender-neutral pronouns and terms and evaluate text for assumptions of limited points of view.
- Use descriptive captions and alternative text (known as alt text), which allow people to visualize images when they can't see them. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn provide specific fields for you to add alt-text for images and GIFs, but where this isn't possible, include descriptive captions instead.
- Include video captions, which are crucial for viewers with hearing impairments. They also enhance the viewing experience for people watching in their non-native language, or viewers in sound-off environments. Video adverts that include captions on Facebook see a 12% average increase in view time.
- Add video descriptions, which share the important sights and sounds that are not spoken. This can be done either through descriptive audio, descriptive transcript or live described video.
- Don't rely on colour to convey meaning - at least 2.2 billion people globally have some form of vision impairment including colour blindness. Use symbols or patterns as an alternative or addition; better still, add clarifying labels.
- Promote positive inclusion by using content that is representative of your audiences (for example, gender, race, disability) and featuring diversity through your visuals, partnerships and collaborations. Also be aware of role assignment and portrayal and ensure that any image is not promoting racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or other stereotypes.

As a minimum, all WCC videos for public use must be captioned. An exception is allowed for webinar recordings.

## 7. Best practice - house rules

It is good practice to have a clear set of house rules for your social media account. These set out how you will use the account, what you expect of others and how you will deal with inappropriate content. They let users know what is and isn't acceptable. These should be posted somewhere visible on the account, with occasional reminders shared on the main feed.

Your house rules should be made clearly accessible to users. Below is an example, which you may wish to adapt for your specific use (for example, if young people or vulnerable adults are involved).

This account is to keep you informed and up to date with what is happening across the county. What we'll do:

- We'll confirm it is us. If you see a Warwickshire County Council account, you can check it is us. We'll list our social media accounts on our website at <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/socialnetworking>
- We'll listen. We'll read all messages and look to flag-up problems with the most relevant part of the organisation. We're keen to hear from you.
- We'll say when we'll monitor each account. We won't be online 24 hours a day. But we will say when we'll be online on each social media account we use.
- We'll be human and polite. We'll treat each message with the politeness you'd expect if you were dealing with us face-to-face or on the telephone.
- We'll follow people where we can. But this doesn't mean endorsement.

What we'd like you to do in return:

- We'd like you to be polite. We know that sometimes things don't go to plan and you'll want to flag things up to us. But do remember, we're human and the person monitoring the social media account is only trying to help. So are other people who are using social media.
- We'd like you not to be anti-social. We won't tolerate swearing, threats or abuse online, just as we don't offline. We won't deal with your query on social media, but we'll direct you to other channels instead.
- We'd like you not to be personal. If you've a complaint to make against an individual, we'll investigate it. We'll point you towards our complaints page at <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/complaints>
- We'd like you not to spam or advertise. Our social media channels aren't the place for followers to advertise. Making the same points over and over – otherwise known as spamming – isn't for our social media either. You'll be better off making a complaint or contacting us another way so we can investigate the issue for you.
- We'd like you not to over-share. If you've got an issue, we'll happily look into it. But be careful not to post private information about yourself or others.

- We'd like you not to spread disinformation or misinformation. That includes anti-vax; QAnon and other tropes. We are committed to ensuring clear public health messaging.

Of course, most of the time social media works fine, but on the rare occasion where you don't stick to the house rules, we reserve the right to delete offending content and block you from contacting us through that route. We also reserve the right to alert the social media platform and/or the police.

If you have any questions about our social media, please email us at [newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk).

## 8. Best practice - dealing with harassment, bullying or inappropriate comments

Unfortunately, social media provides a platform for bullying and harassment and can give people an opportunity to spread factually incorrect and inappropriate content. If a member of staff feels that they are being subjected to bullying, harassment or discrimination, threatened or has any safety concerns they should speak to their line manager or another appropriate manager immediately.

Any comments made on council social media channels which include misinformation, inappropriate, discrimination, offensive or abusive comments or hate speech are hidden or deleted.

Where necessary, persistent offenders or abusive customers can, and should be, blocked from all channels to protect staff from further abuse.

## 9. Best practice - crisis communications

There will be times when your service or account may be involved in a crisis. These can take many forms and levels, but we would normally classify a social media crisis if:

- the subject is the only thing people are talking about negatively,
- the subject is highly emotive or represents a high reputational risk,
- the subject is legal in nature – or has negative legal connotations,
- the wider media have picked up on it and are reporting it negatively.

If you think your account is in crisis, then post a listening message (something as simple as "Thank you for bringing this to our attention, we are investigating and will respond as soon as we are able"). This gives you time to assess the situation, make sure relevant stakeholders are aware, and discuss the most appropriate response with Marketing and Communications.

Your considered response should be agreed by all stakeholders before posting on social media. In formulating this, there are a number of things to consider.

- What format will the response take? A tweet, a post, a statement, a news release?
- Does it answer the questions asked?

- Is the information in the public domain?
- Does it show empathy?
- If we are sorry, have we said sorry?
- Are we being sufficiently transparent?
- Have we updated other communication channels (for example, website) so that there is a consistent message?
- Does the response use plain English and avoid council jargon?
- Would it help to have published FAQs to sit alongside the response?

Once the response is made, return to listening and share any new information with stakeholders.

## 10. Training and sharing best practice

Marketing and Communications can deliver online training sessions on how to manage a social media account, either for individuals or service areas. They also run a Social Media Users Group (SMUG), where colleagues who use or manage a council social media account meet monthly to discuss best practice, share ideas and raise challenges. All are welcome. To join the group or to arrange a training session, please contact [newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:newsteam@warwickshire.gov.uk).

# Appendix B: Social media guidelines for WCC's Fire and Rescue Service

## 1. Introduction

It is important that WCC's Fire and Rescue Service build and maintain a positive reputation, so that residents trust us, take our advice and feel able to come to us when needed. Therefore, the Warwickshire County Council Social Media Policy and general guidelines (Appendix A) apply equally to Fire and Rescue social media accounts.

This Appendix B provides specific guidance on the additional practicalities of using social media in a Fire and Rescue context.

## 2. Managing your account

We recommend that you have a small number of people who have administration rights to your social accounts. This provides resilience should someone be absent. They will be responsible for running the account, with the support of the Marketing and Communications team. They are responsible for posting, editing and deleting content from the account.

## 3. Content ideas

Having a range of content will help to increase the reach of your account and the level of engagement with your audience. Ideas for content include:

- pictures of the crew (who have consented to their photo being shared) at a community event or delivering a presentation, with a summary of what they were doing,
- posts about specific incidents (see Section 4),
- pictures and a description of what was done on a drill night, or an exercise; these can show how you develop your technical expertise,
- community safety and fire prevention messages; for example, asking people to test their smoke alarms with a hashtag #TestItTuesday,
- recruitment messages; promote your vacancies using the national on-call material: <https://oncallfire.uk/>,
- historic photos of the station or past incidents,
- sharing content from other stations, the main WFRS account or other WCC accounts.

## 4. Incident posts

Posting information about incidents can promote the work that we do, provide useful information to residents about events in their local area and help to raise awareness of safety issues. For example, a

house fire provides an opportunity to remind the public of the importance of a working smoke alarm and a car accident provides an opportunity to share messages about driving according to the weather conditions.

However, there are some instances when incidents should not be shared. In general, in the case of a fatality or where there is a possible criminal link to an incident, this will be shared from the main WFRS account and should only be later shared by the individual station social media accounts. In all instances, you should be mindful of Data Protection and the risk of prejudicing any subsequent legal proceedings related to the incident.

When posting about incidents, there are a number of details you can include.

- Date and time of call, length of time you spent dealing with the incident.
- General location – the village, locality or town.
- The number and type of appliances attending and their home station.
- The type of incident (for example, road traffic collision or fire)
- What was involved in the incident (for example, a barn on fire, a car colliding with a tree)
- The impact of your work (e.g. the surrounding businesses were able to continue to trade, or fire damage to the property was minimised)
- The accompanying safety message related to the incident.

However, there are specific details of incidents which should not be shared.

- Details of firefighter numbers in each appliance.
- Casualty/fatality details.
- Brand names of items that may have been the cause of a fire.
- Any official sensitive information.
- Incident details linked specifically to an individual or exact location.
- Sensitive operational information.
- Any suggestion or insinuation of blame; this puts you at risk of defamation.
- If you receive any requests for any of the above information through your social media account, please do not share it, but instead ask the individual to complete a Freedom of Information request (see Section 4.1 of Appendix A).

## 5. Photography and video

Permission should be obtained prior to filming or photography. Parental permission must be obtained to photograph or film any child or young person under the age of 18 and vulnerable adults. This should be in writing, using the council's [consent form](#). Children under the age of 18 can only be included in photographs or video without parental permission if the child is clearly unrecognisable.

Images and video from scenes are acceptable but should only be taken and shared after permission is given from the officer in charge.

The content should not be uploaded to social media while at the incident, unless the footage would benefit the public; for example, during a major incident it may be in the public interest to share

information immediately. If this is the case, then the officer in charge of the incident should authorise the content of any posts.

Any footage from an incident should be checked before using, looking specifically to ensure there are no signs of:

- any personal items,
- signs of death or injury,
- distinguishing features of a property, including house number or name,
- number plates,
- children, young people under the age of 18 or vulnerable adults,
- inappropriate PPE.

If possible, these features can be either deleted or disguised. Otherwise, the image or video should not be used. If in any doubt, the decision should be made by a Station Commander or above.

Once the image or video is approved for use, it should be posted alongside a description of the incident, the action the Fire and Rescue service took and links to any related safety information.



# Appendix C: Social media guidelines for Members

## 1. Introduction

Warwickshire County Council's Social Media Policy and general guidelines equally apply to Members. However, this document provides specific guidance for Members using social media in their professional capacity and is intended to complement the general rules under the WCC Members Code of Conduct.

## 2. General principles of social media

In most cases, it will be presumed by others that you are speaking in your capacity as a Member on social media. Even if you are clear you are acting in a private capacity, it may be less clear to others, meaning that your views can be taken as being those of your organisation or party.

Therefore, it is worth noting that:

- You should include a written declaration on your account which sets out the capacity in which you are communicating, for example, on behalf of WCC, your political party or as an individual.
- Communication on social media is no more likely than other forms to be misinterpreted, but the immediacy of social media means any error of judgement is likely to be magnified. The ease of dissemination means that something that is perceived as controversial is likely to lead to rapid and wide broadcasting.
- The same legal and ethical rules apply to social media as other communication channels.
- The best use of social media is conversational in tone, but what you share is recorded and permanent. You are effectively speaking in public every time you post.
- It is expected that you will communicate politically on social media, but you should take care not to say anything that you wouldn't be comfortable repeating or justifying in person.

## 3. Potential legal issues

It is important to be aware of the legal issues which can apply on social media. These include:

- Defamation – you may be vulnerable to a libel claim if you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation, or if you don't take action to remove content that someone else has left on your account.
- Copyright – you must only use images or text from a copyrighted source if you have permission to do so.
- Data protection – you should not share personal data of an individual unless you have their express permission.

- Bias and predetermination – if you are involved in making planning, licensing or other quasi-judicial decisions, do not say anything through social media that suggests you have made a decision on an issue that is due to be formally decided. While your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to listen to all the evidence and were genuinely persuadable to a different view. The decision may otherwise be later challenged as invalid and leaves the council open to a legal claim.

#### 4. Best practice guidelines

In addition to the best practice guidelines set out in Appendix A, you need to be aware of the following will also apply to your social media account.

- Set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or social networking account.
- Monitor the account for defamatory, discriminatory, inappropriate or offensive posts from others and remove them as soon as possible.
- Be aware that you will be perceived as acting in your official capacity if you publish information that you could only have accessed by being an elected member.
- You are welcome to make comments on the merits of proposals but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals is likely to be seen as disrespectful.
- Do not use your account for party political purposes or for political campaigning. You should be particularly careful about any statements you make in the pre-election period.
- Do not tweet, post images or share updates on matters which are politically controversial during the pre-election period.
- Recognise and celebrate the positive, as well as the negative. Say thank you where appropriate.
- Post regularly; keep your account relevant and up to date.
- Be careful not to share confidential information that you have had access to as an elected Member.
- Ensure that your personal or political views are not seen as being those of the council.
- Avoid using social media when you are tired, angry, upset or your judgment may be impaired.
- Remember the Member Code of Conduct applies to all forms of communications including social media.