

Standards Committee : 28 April 2010

Title of report: Use of Social Media by Councillors and the Code of Conduct

Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?	N/A
Is it in the Council's Forward Plan?	N/A
Is it eligible for "call in" by Scrutiny?	N/A
Cabinet member portfolio	Corporate

Electoral wards affected and ward councillors consulted: All

Public or private: Public

1. Purpose of Report

On 25 February 2010 Standards for England published its "Blogging Quick Guide" which is reproduced as the Annex to this report. The Improvement and Development Agency, Standards for England, the National Association of Local Councils and the Leadership Centre for Local Government then jointly produced "Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership".

The purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of the standards issues which are raised by the use of social media by individual councillors.

2. Key Points

Social media is a collective term used to describe the ways in which people can create and publish material on the internet. This involves people sharing content such as text, video and pictures and creating conversations. Social media tools include Twitter, Facebook and blogging. The way in which some councillors communicate with local people is already being transformed by the use of social media. The key consequence of the availability of social media is that anyone can publish and share their views, or have conversations with others on the internet. This is sometimes referred to as being like everyone having their own virtual printing press.

Kirklees Council has been invited by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to be an exemplar authority in taking forward the recommendations of the Councillors Commission. The Commission looked at the role of councillor and the incentives and barriers to being a councillor. Their report produced over 60 recommendations, looking at a range of areas where the role and profile of councillors could be improved and developed. This is being taken forward by pilot authorities like Kirklees under the banner of the 21st Century Pilot scheme.

As part of the pilot arrangements in Kirklees, a key strand of the work involves looking at the information and intelligence that ward councillors should have to fulfil their roles, along with exploring the ways in which they can better communicate with their residents. This work is both innovative and far reaching, involving a range of approaches including the use of social media. The work is being driven and overseen by a cross party councillor pilot board (Cllrs Palfreeman, Cooper, Harris and David Woodhead). The pilot board have been acknowledged nationally for the work they are doing, and are now approaching the point where the concepts and projects that they have been testing out will be rolled out to all councillors in Kirklees. This includes ward portals for all councillors and the opportunity to explore the potential use of social media tools within the context of their community leadership roles.

It is clearly important that the transition phase from pilot to roll out is underpinned by sound advice and support for councillors within the context of the standards regime. Facilitating councillors to be the most effective community leaders they can be is a key outcome of the pilot, but this is strongly linked to ensuring that such councillors are armed with the most effective advice to ensure that they are having regard to relevant standards issues.

Here are some of the terms used when talking about social media:

- Blogs are journals which individuals publish on the internet. They usually have a facility for readers to add their own comments on the issues raised and to share their own opinions.
- Twitter is an internet tool which enables people to share short pieces of information, limited to 140 characters (including spaces and punctuation), links to other information on the internet, report on what they are up to or ask for help. It can help councillors and local people share information and receive feedback.
- Facebook is a social networking website. Users can add friends and send them messages, and update information about themselves. Facebook can also be used to set up networks of people living in a particular area or who are interested in a particular issue.

As with any form of communication there is the risk that the use of social media by councillors will generate complaints that councillors have breached the Code of Conduct. As with the use of email, the informality of social media and the speed with which information can be communicated creates the risk of things being communicated in haste or anger which would not have been communicated after a period of reflection.

The problem areas for the Code of Conduct are identified by Standards for England as being:

- When are councillors using social media acting in their official capacity?
- Improper use of Council resources.
- Disrespect
- Bullying
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Disrepute

Social media clearly have an important and increasing role in enabling councillors to communicate with local people and vice versa but do create the need for councillors to have guidance upon how to use social media in a way which protects them from standards complaints.

Work is being undertaken by the Council's Governance officers to promote the use of social media by councillors and it is suggested that the approach taken by standards committee to these matters be coordinated with that work.

3. Implications for the Council

Effective use of social media by councillors will become increasingly important. The benefits for councillors as community leaders are potentially significant. Social media provides an opportunity for councillors to secure a breadth of information and intelligence about the areas and people they represent whilst also providing an opportunity to communicate with a large section of their electorate cheaply, timely and innovatively. By providing appropriate guidance to councillors the standards committee can help these tools to be used without creating unnecessary problems for councillors or damage to the Council's reputation.

4. Consultees and their opinions

N/a

5. Officer recommendations and reasons

It is recommended that:

5.1 The Standards for England Blogging Quick Guide be circulated to all councillors and to local parish and town councils.

5.2 A report be brought to standards committee when further work has been done on the promotion of the use of social media by councillors.

6. Cabinet portfolio holder recommendation

N/a

7. Next steps

See recommendation.

8. Contact officer and relevant papers

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Background Papers:

“Connected Councillors – A guide to using social media to support local leadership” which is available at
http://socialmedia.21st.cc/wp-content/uploads/connected_councillors.pdf

ANNEX

Standards for England - Blogging Quick Guide

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.

Standards for England support the use of such media and encourage councillors to get online. You should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you would when making statements in person or in writing,

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. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct (the Code) and to ensure your use of online media is well received we suggest the following general hints.

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; if you use a council provided blog site or social networking area, 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
- make political points, but 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

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

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.

Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. We encourage members to respect the [Ten General Principles of Public Life](#). 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.

Find out more

- Please read our [Code of Conduct: Guidance for members 2007](#)
- Call our enquiries line on 0845 078 8181
- Email us at enquiries@standardsforengland.gov.uk

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