



# Report to Standards and General Purposes Committee

**Date:** 2 December 2021

**Title:** Code of Conduct and Social Media Policy

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**Ward(s) affected:** none specific

**Recommendations:** The committee is asked to:-

- 1. Consider the best way to promote the suggested guidance to councillors relating to social media and resolve on the next steps required**

**Reason for decision:** To review the Code of Conduct to ensure promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the Council in relation to use of social media and associated platforms.

## Background

- 1.1 On 10 December 2020 this Committee noted and reviewed the guidance documents approved by the Shadow Executive as they relate to councillors and social media and which were contained in the Social Media Strategy and the Social Media Policy.
- 1.2 On 21 July 2021 full Council accepted recommendations from this Committee and adopted an amended version of the Local Government Association Model Code of Conduct as set out in the report to full Council.
- 1.3 At the meeting on 7 October 2021 during a discussion on the Code of Conduct the Committee asked that a report was submitted on linking the social media guidance into the Code of Conduct.

## Content of report

- 1.4 The Code of Conduct confirms that the Code will apply when councillors are acting in their capacity as a councillor and this will include when their actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that they are acting as a councillor. It also makes it clear that the Code can apply when a councillor is using social media.
- 1.5 Appendix A sets out the guidance to councillors detailed in the Social Media Strategy and the Social Media Policy.
- 1.6 It is suggested that the details in Appendix A are annexed to the Code and referred to in the introduction of the Code by inserting reference as follows:

### **Application of the Code of Conduct**

The Code applies to all forms of communication and interaction, including:

- at face-to-face meetings
- at online or telephone meetings
- in written communication
- in verbal communication
- in non-verbal communication
- in electronic and social media communication, posts, statements and comments – for further guidance only please see the Social Media Protocol inserted for reference at the Code of Conduct.

- 1.7 It is suggested that the annex is specifically excluded from the Constitution so that it can be changed and updated as required and in line with the Social Media Strategy and Social Media Policy.
- 1.8 It is considered that this would then allow the Monitoring Officer to use delegated powers to amend the Constitution to bring the guidance to the attention of those considering or looking at the Code of Conduct.
- 1.9 If the Committee considers Appendix A should become part of the Constitution, this will require a recommendation to this effect to be made to full Council.

## Other options considered

- 1.10 As detailed in the body of the report

## Legal and financial implications

- 1.11 The Committee is required to promote and maintain standards of councillor conduct. Having a reference in the Code of Conduct would promote the guidance and standards of conduct.

## Corporate implications

- 1.12 The effectiveness of the Councils standards arrangements is necessary for good governance and contributes to the effectiveness of the Members, the Council and helps ensure proper and legal decision-making.

## Consultation and communication

- 1.13 As detailed in the body of the report.

## Next steps and review

Depending on the decision of the Committee to reference the guidance in the Constitution or report to Council.

## *Appendices*

**Annex A**      Proposed Annex

## Background papers

*Social Media Strategy*

*Social Media Policy*



## Appendix A

### Social Media Protocol for Councillors

Please note the following are extracts from the Council's Social Media Strategy and Social Media Policy – they are included for reference and guidance only and do **not** form part of the Constitution

#### Social Media Strategy

##### Members' use of social media

- Members are encouraged to establish and manage their own social media accounts. This helps members to engage with residents and be open, transparent and democratically accountable to them.
- Members will be offered social media training organised by the Communications Team and given the social media policy and guide for reference.
- To foster a sense of community, Buckinghamshire Council corporate accounts may share or engage with posts from Members on social media.
- Members are responsible for their own social media accounts and must adhere to the Members' Code of Conduct at all times. This is covered in more detail in the social media policy

#### Social Media Policy

A number of councillors have their own social media accounts with which to communicate with residents, share their own views and connect with the community proactively. This enables councillors to listen to what people are saying and engage with them on an equal footing, focusing on two-way communications rather than simply delivering messages via press releases and newsletters.

Given the high profile of councillors in representing local communities, there are some important points that need to be considered:

- Misuse of social media may be in breach of the Code of Conduct for members.
- Social media is a very public communication channel and, as a Buckinghamshire Council member, anything you post or share can reflect on yourself and the organisation both positively and negatively. It can also be shared in seconds to a huge audience and cannot be controlled.
- Your social media content is likely to be connected to your role as a councillor and, while some councillors try to make it clear on their social media pages that their

comments are their personal views, it is rarely a defence for well-known public figures. Inevitably, your personal views will be associated with your position as a councillor.

- Ask yourself whether you would say the same thing at a public meeting or to a reporter as you would post on social media. It could well amount to the same thing and, once posted, you can assume it's permanent.
- Avoid engaging with someone who is argumentative.
- Social media content should be accurate, appropriate, respectful, must not be open to misinterpretation and must not breach copyright law. Any content which fails in this is likely to damage the reputation of you and the Council and could risk breaching the Code of Conduct for members.
- You must not disclose confidential Council information, documents you only have access to as a councillor, or information which has been told to you by a resident or other party in confidence (even if you try to anonymise by removing names). Privacy must be respected.
- The best engagement comes from posts that are clear, jargon-free and give useful or interesting information for your followers. Posts also have more impact where they are accompanied by a picture or video.

