

# Social Media / Networking Policy 2015

Guidance for Council Members

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# **Responsible conduct policy for using social media for Rossendale Council Members**

## **1. Scope**

This policy applies to all Rossendale Council Members and applies to both Council work related social media use and personal social media use. It is aimed at protecting all Members and the reputation of the Council.

## **2. What is social media?**

Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, Pintrest, Wikipedia and networking sites such as LinkedIn or Local Government Knowledge Hub Forums, are all examples of social media, though they are not an exhaustive list. The term refers to any online technologies and practices that are used to share content and covers anything on the internet where content is created and adapted by the people who use the site and which allows two-way conversations.

## **3. Why do local authorities need social media? (Benefits and Risks)**

Currently Rossendale Borough Council uses Twitter and Facebook, but as the world of social media is ever changing and growing this may change and the Council may look to become involved in other forms of social media.

Local authorities and other public sector agencies are increasingly looking to social media to engage with their audiences for many reasons:

- Have a more active relationship with the community
- As it is both fast and responsive it can offer immediate communication, residents expect prompt responses from their Council
- Helps to engage the younger people more
- It's cost effective to use
- Better interaction with other organisations, key stakeholder, and the media
- It can reach a mass audience quickly, it is more accessible to the community
- It presents are more "human" face of the Council
- Central Government are promoting the use of social media and e-government is being incentivised and encouraged.
- It can bring people together over common interests
- Useful way to consult with residents and get feedback
- Authorities can publish their own message, which other media may ignore
- It can provide engaging live coverage of events (e.g. elections, incidents and events we are part of)

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However, social media must be treated with respect and caution as there are risks to its use. These include, but not exclusive to;

- Comments/posts may stay public for a long time and possibly never be removed
- Comments/posts can be republished on other websites
- Comments/posts can be copied, used and amended by others
- Comment/posts could be changed to mis-represent what has been said
- Social media can attract comments and interest from other people/the media
- Social media can be seen by anyone
- Social media accounts can be hacked, bringing the reputation of the Council into disrepute and tarnishing the public image of the Council
- Criticism of the Council from the general public can often be seen by a mass audience and can threaten the image and reputation of the Council
- Comments and posts can affect the credibility of Officers/Members

There is a requirement to always be aware of the standards, conditions of use and guidelines for posting laid down by the owner of any site or network and make sure they are complied with.

#### **4. Legal Implications**

Social media use still has legal implications around libel, deformation of character, copyright and data protection.

Libel is the publication of a statement about a person that damages his/her reputation and causes others to have a lower opinion of him/her. If an employee publishes a statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against them.

Placing images or text from a copyrighted source (e.g. extracts from publications, photos etc.) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Permission should be sought in advance of publishing. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages against the individual. The posting of images and/or footage of people online and tagging people in photos can infringe their privacy.

Personal data of individuals should not be published. Members must not disclose anyone's personal details, without their express written permission, and they must ensure that and personal or sensitive information is handled in line with the Council's Data Protection Policy.

#### **5. Using social media and your role at Rossendale Borough Council**

If Members use social media for their own personal use or within their Member role at the Council there is a requirement to stay within the law at all times, and to be aware that fair use, financial disclosure, [libel](#), [defamation](#), [copyright](#) and [data protection laws](#) apply on-line just as in any other media.

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Members need to be aware that people may see social media information whether individuals identify themselves as an elected member of Rossendale Council or not, and there is a need to think carefully about how much personal information you make public.

Members are advised that personal details like home addresses, phone numbers, financial information or full date of birth should never be given out to prevent identity theft.

Where Members choose to make comments on council-related matters, they must make it clear that they are speaking personally, or as an elected Member, and not on behalf of Rossendale Council. The easiest way to do this is to write in the 'first person' (I think / my view is.) and include a visible disclaimer such as "The views expressed here are my own and don't necessarily represent the views of Rossendale Borough Council."

Members need to also be aware that they may attract media interest as an individual, and therefore care is needed whenever social media is used for personal or business reasons.

There is a need to remember obligations to residents, service users, partners, suppliers and colleagues and to protect the Council's reputation. Details of or dealings with colleagues, customers or partners should never be given out without their explicit consent.

Offensive comments should never be made about any customer, supplier, partner or any of their employees or Council colleagues. Racist, sexist or LGBT phobic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, unacceptable language or behaviour which is unacceptable in the workplace should not be used, this could bring the Council into disrepute, break the law and could result in disciplinary action and/or prosecution.

Individuals should ensure that they;

- don't "pick fights"
- are the first to correct personal mistakes
- refrain from altering previous posts without indicating that they have done so
- aren't afraid of being themselves, but there is a need to be considerate about other people's views, especially around 'controversial' topics such as politics and religion, individuals can challenge without being abusive or rude
- are credible, accurate, fair and thorough and do the right thing
- stay within the legal limits

Information that is gained from social media can be shared with others, where appropriate.

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## **6. Personal Use of Social Media**

Members must be aware that, where they using social media and are identified, directly or indirectly, as an elected Member of Rossendale Borough Council they are expected to behave appropriately and in line with the Council's values and policies.

Any information you post on social media can be accessed around the world in seconds and will be publically available for all to see. In light of this **some guidelines** are;

- Add a disclaimer to your social media account to make it clear that this is your own personal account and not affiliated with the Council
- Check your privacy settings
- Your work email address should not be used when registering to a social media account for personal use
- Mature discretion should be exercised in all personal communications on social media
- Gross misconduct can also apply to activity on personal social media accounts when it has threatened the reputation and image of the Council and brought the Council's name into disrepute
- Do not be tempted to "let off steam" on social media, you may post comments you later regret and you may not be able to delete them
- Don't be tempted to share or retweet gossip / hear 'say – posting untrue comments about someone, or even just repeating untrue things that someone else has said could constitute libel
- Think about social media as an online CV
- Members are advised to use their judgment; Members are reminded that there are always consequences to what is published
- You are responsible for the information you are putting online

## **7. Speaking for the Council**

Those using social networking sites should not 'speak for the Council' (disclose information, publish information, make commitments or engage in activities on behalf of the Council) unless they are authorised to do so. From time to time this will be regularly reviewed.

Members need to ensure that any wiki entries, articles or comments are neutral in tone, factual and truthful. Rude or offensive comments on any online encyclopaedias or sites should never be posted. You will also need to check the house rules of the site. You may also need permission from the relevant wikieditor and the council's People and Policy Team. If you edit online encyclopaedias at a Council office or on a Council device, the source of the correction may be recorded as a Rossendale Council IP address. That means it may look as if the Council itself has made the changes. If this is correcting an error about the Council, that's fine – there is a need to be open about our actions, in other circumstances care needs to be taken not to bring the Council into disrepute. Members should bring the criticism

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to the attention of the Corporate Officer or People and Policy Team who will respond if appropriate.

**8. Social Media Use in Council Meetings**

Legislation has recently been passed by the Department for Communities and Local Government that allows members of the press and public to live report Council meetings via social media. People wishing to do this should ask the Council about the facilities to do this. This provision for social media is details in Rossendale Borough Council’s Constitution and Section 40 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

Members must not publish or report on meeting which are private or internal (where no members of the public are present or it is of a confidential nature).

**9. Risks**

Risks that Members should be aware of, that come with social media use are;

- Virus or other malware (malicious software) infection from infected sites
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Damage to the Council’s reputation
- Social engineering attacked (also known as ‘phishing’)
- Cyber Bullying, witch-hunting, stalking or harassment
- Civil or criminal action relating to breaches of legislation
- Breach of safeguarding through the use of images or personal details leading to the exploitation of vulnerable adults
- Breaking of privacy laws

Due to the above risks it is important that your actions and activities are in line with this policy.

Remember that everyone can see what you post on social media, even private messages at times; this is a wide and uncontrolled audience. There is also the potential that the post is there to stay, deleting it may not always get rid of it completely, or it may have been passed on already.

Members must make sure that all video and media is safe to share, does not contain any confidential, discriminatory or derogatory information, and is not protected by any copyright or intellectual property rights. If the content is official Rossendale Council content then it must be labelled and tagged as such. Employees need to ensure that any material considered obscene should not be published and is a criminal offence.

The use of social media can compromise the privacy and security of personal data. Please make sure you never give out any personal details on social media without seeking their permission.

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Safeguarding issues are paramount because social media sites are often misused by offenders. Safeguarding is everyone's business at the Council – all Members have a responsibility to report any concerns about other site users.

Contact the Council's 'Designated Safeguarding Officer' (DSO), Clare Law, on 01706 252457 / Ext. 2457.

## **10. Complaints – Misuse of Social Media**

If an employee has any concerns about anything posted on a social media site which the Council has responsibility for, or an account linked to an employee or Member, they should contact the People and Policy Team in the first instance and provide any supporting evidence to enable appropriate action to be taken.

## **11. Conclusion**

These guidelines are to protect Members and the reputation of the Council - they are not meant to restrict genuine and work related use of what is an important method of communication and engagement. By its nature though, social media is fast and responsive so when a mistake is made it can rapidly get out of control. Where a service area wants to use social media please contact the People & Policy Team.

Further clarification can be obtained from:

People & Policy Team 01706 252454  
[PeopleandPolicy@rossendalebc.gov.uk](mailto:PeopleandPolicy@rossendalebc.gov.uk)

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