

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>COUNCILLORS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA</b>
<b>REPORT BY:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES</b>
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	<b>CAROLYN WHEATER – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (LEGAL AND CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES)</b>

**1. Purpose of Report**

1.1 To invite comments on proposed guidance for councillors on the use of social media.

**2. Background**

2.1 In recent years, an increasing number of people, including councillors, have begun to use online social media services. These services typically allow users to create their own public profiles which can then be used to post messages and create social links with other service users.

2.2 These services undoubtedly offer a great number of advantages, including allowing councillors to communicate easily with members of the public. However, this ease of contact presents a new set of challenges, including the appropriateness of the messages being sent and the use of technology within meetings.

2.3 The Council has received a number of requests from councillors, particularly those who have been recently elected, to provide specific guidance to supplement the broader provisions made in other documents regarding general member conduct.

**3. Development of Guidance for Councillors**

3.1 Following recent requests for guidance, councillors were alerted to the planned consideration of the matter by the Committee, and were invited to provide views on the use of social media. Member comments received by officers were broadly supportive of the changes which the technology offered and also highlighted the need for effective guidance to be offered to councillors who might otherwise be concerned about engaging in this manner.

3.2 As such, officers have given consideration to developing guidance which meets the particular requirements of the Council and our councillors. Having similar regard to policies already in place at other local authorities, draft guidance for the Council is attached as **Appendix A**.

- 3.3 As highlighted within the preamble to guidance, there remains an essential level of trust in councillors to behave in an appropriate manner. However, it is inevitable that councillors' use of social media must be more carefully considered than for a general member of the public.
- 3.4 Some other local authorities have specifically prohibited the use of mobile devices within meetings. This is not a feature of the proposed guidance, and any similar change would have to be agreed by Council. Having regard to the use of mobile devices in everyday life and, as referenced elsewhere in this agenda, the potential increase in the use of tablet computers for reading agendas, a blanket ban on mobile devices would appear to be somewhat draconian. This could also prevent any members from taking steps to balance their commitments to the Council with other areas of their life.
- 3.5 The guidance is separated into three sections covering behaviour at meetings, interactions with the public, and interactions with councillors and officers. There is inevitably the possibility of some interactions blending with others. As such, the guidance should be read as a whole, taking note of the general principles put forward.
- 3.6 Consideration was given to the provision of examples of potentially positive and negative use of social media. However, it was felt that this could be counter-productive, both in terms of removing some flexibility for any future consideration of the circumstances of an individual complaint and the likely speed with which any examples could become obsolete. Instead a focus is placed upon a broader set of principles which councillors can use to inform their conduct. Members should be aware that, as with any topic, Democratic Services and the Monitoring Officer will always try to assist members by being available to offer advice in relation to particular queries.
- 3.8 Members are recommended to offer comments on the following areas:
- Whether the proposed guidance on social media is appropriate and useful.
  - Whether any additional areas should be addressed within the guidance.
  - Whether any formal reference to the role of technology within meetings should be made within the constitution.

#### **4. Strategic Priorities**

- 4.1 Councillors should be open and accessible to the residents of their ward. The proper use of social media is a potentially valuable tool in forming links between councillors and the communities they serve, thereby improving the quality of democratic engagement.

#### **5. Finance Implications**

- 5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

#### **6. Legal Implications**

- 6.1 No changes to the Council's constitution are proposed within this report. Any future changes proposed in relation to the Council Procedure Rules would require

approval by Council.

**7. Recommendations**

- 7.1 That the Ethics and Engagement Committee consider whether the proposed guidance on social media is appropriate for circulation to all councillors.