

Social Media Guidance for Councillors

The City of Lincoln Council recognises that the use of online social media can be an excellent tool for engaging with residents and communities. A number of services give the public a direct communication channel to councillors, allowing ideas to be developed and problems to be solved. However, the increasing use of this technology poses a new set of challenges and opportunities in terms of the operation of the City of Lincoln Council and its councillors.

As such, this document has been produced to offer guidance to councillors on the manner in which the technology should be used when acting as a councillor or on Council business. It is not intended to be exhaustive, or to replace existing constitutional or legal provisions.

As the democratically-elected representatives of their wards, there should be an assumption that members will act in a responsible manner for the benefit of their ward and the city as a whole. To a large degree, members are responsible for their own conduct and ensuring that it is appropriate to the situation. Mobile devices are a fundamental feature of modern life and prohibiting their use in meetings is unworkable and could limit members in balancing the demands of their family and working life. However, as with any form of communication, it is possible for the technology to be used improperly; councillors should therefore always be conscious of their public role and profile.

Use of social media or technology within meetings

Public Perception

When sitting as a member of a committee, the first duty of the councillor is to ensure they are giving proper attention to the business being considered. This includes being aware of the public perception of his or her role. Even if a councillor is paying full attention to an item while using a mobile device, it is necessary to consider that it may not appear this way. If a councillor is clearly making excessive use of a mobile device, it may be appropriate for the chair of the meeting to raise this matter, particularly if it is disrupting the meeting.

Regulatory Committees

In particular, members of quasi-judicial committees such as the Licensing or Planning Committee should be especially mindful of the need to be seen to be paying full attention to items. This is particularly true in view of the personal importance attached by applicants and the public to these matters, and the increased likelihood of a procedural challenge to the decision being taken.

Declarations of Interest

It is recommended that if a committee member has declared an interest in an item and left the room, that wherever possible councillors should cease to use mobile devices for the duration of that item to preclude the possibility of any contact between the remaining committee members and those who have left the room.

Photographs and Recordings

Members should not take any photographs or recordings of meetings without the express permission of the meeting's chair.

Private Business

As a general rule, members should not transmit any information that is either exempt or confidential beyond the confines of the meeting. This also applies to exempt or confidential information received outside a meeting. If in any doubt regarding the status of information, members should consult with Democratic Services or the Monitoring Officer before disseminating it in any form.

Engaging with the public

Standards of Behaviour

As an elected representative, a councillor's standard of behaviour is under particular scrutiny. Members of the public who approach a councillor in relation to their role, either online or otherwise, should expect to be treated politely and to be helped as far as is practicable.

Confidentiality

Members of the public may have a reasonable expectation that certain comments made to a councillor will either be treated in confidence or shared solely with people who can reasonably be expected to assist with a person's request. This is particularly true of any personal information disclosed to a councillor, either in person or through social media.

Acting as a Councillor

If a complaint is made against a councillor, one relevant factor may be whether they were acting as a councillor at the time of any cause for complaint. Given the ease with which online comments can be replicated and removed from their original context or intent, members should consider whether they would be comfortable publicly defending anything which they have posted online. It is also worth considering the context in which any information is posted with regard to whether it would be considered that a councillor is acting in a private capacity at the time of posting.

Engaging with officers and councillors

Appropriate Behaviour towards Officers

Members should have regard to the Member-Officer Protocol, and the need to treat officers with respect. Councillors should be continually aware of the need for the officer to act in a professional capacity and should not act in a manner which would compromise this, either in appearance or in fact.

Appropriate Behaviour towards Councillors

The political nature of councillors' work means that debate and disagreement is often a fundamental and entirely proper part of their role. However, there is a line between passionate debate and personal attacks, regarding which members should be mindful. Comments made by councillors towards others, including those made under online pseudonyms, may be treated in the same manner as any similar comments made in person.