



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES – MR CRAIG GRIFFITHS

13th June 2023

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: All Wards

Social Media Training for Elected Members

Purpose of the Report:

To provide an update to members of the Standards Committee of the guidance that elected members receive in respect of social media and to agree the establishment of a Task and Finish Group to specifically look at the issues of social media, with the aim that a report be brought to the Standards Committee with recommendations for members to consider.

Background:

Effective communication is vital for councillors. Social media can play a key role in achieving this, provided it is used in the right way.

Social media can enable councillors to:

- promote the work they are doing to a variety of audience
- engage with residents, businesses and community groups
- listen to conversations and issues going on in their local areas.

The Member Code of Conduct and relevant legislation applies online and in social media. If a member is referring to themselves online in any way to their

role as a councillor, they are deemed to be acting in their 'official capacity' and any conduct may fall within the code.

Recent years have seen a small increase in a number of complaints that have been made to the Ombudsman or members of the public contacting the Monitoring Officer regarding comments that have been placed by Members on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to which they have taken objection to and wish to complain further. The Ombudsman have found that there has been no breach of the Members Code of Conduct in any of these complaints but nevertheless they are becoming more mindful of such issues.

To illustrate the approach from the Ombudsman, in a case from 2020, the Ombudsman received a complaint that a member of Sully and Lavernock Community Council failed to observe the Code of Conduct for elected members. It was alleged that the member made a series of public posts, on the social media platform Facebook, which could have the potential to damage the reputation of the Council. The Ombudsman found that 3 public posts, dated between 10 January and 11 March 2019, which made reference to high profile female politicians, were gratuitously offensive and could reasonably be regarded as bringing the Councillor's Office or Authority into disrepute which was suggestive of a breach of paragraph of 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct. The Ombudsman considered that the language used went beyond political expression and was so egregious that, should a breach of the Code of Conduct be found and a sanction imposed, it would be a proportionate interference with the Councillor's right to freedom of expression. The Ombudsman also found that the Councillor had failed to supply evidence he claimed to hold in respect of the privacy of the posts and that, in refusing to provide information, he had failed to comply with a request in connection with the investigation which was suggestive of a breach of paragraph 6(2) of the Code of Conduct. The Ombudsman referred his investigation report to the Adjudication Panel for Wales for its consideration, who suspended the member for 15 months

The below are some principles that that have stemmed from recent Ombudsman and WLGA guidance:

- Members need to take note of the comments that other people make on their site. It may be a fine line to tread, but if they allow offensive or disrespectful comments to stand on their site then the Ombudsman has taken the view that it can put off other members of their community and expose the member to Code of Conduct issues.
- Words cannot be unspoken and even if members delete a hastily fired off blog post or tweet, it will probably have already been read and will be referenced or duplicated in places on the web beyond their reach. If they

- include photographs or other images, they may need to consider whether anyone shown in the photographs or images might reasonably object
- If they publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation they may take a libel action against them. This will also apply if they allow someone else to publish something libellous on their website if they know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. Guidance produced by the Ombudsman does suggest that comments that are making inaccurate criticism of your authority in a public arena might well be regarded as bringing the Council into disrepute so caution should be exercised when comments are being made.

As part of member induction, all members receive training in respect of the Members Code of Conduct. Members will note the training is an introductory session, designed to cover

- What is social media?
- The benefits of social media
- Issues that must be considered
- How does the code of conduct apply?
- General principles/rules for consideration

Members also received training from the Welsh Local Government Association on Social Media and its benefits.

This training includes:

- Why use social media?
- How is social media used?
- Your Audience
- Brand and Guidelines
- Planning your social media
- Social media management tools
- Using Analytics
- Social media Platforms
- email mailing list
- Types of content (images and graphics, creating videos)
- Social media top tips

In their Annual Report of 2022/2023, members of the Standards Committee indicated as part of their future priorities they would wish to look more at social media. The increased use of social media means the accountability and conduct of members is of the utmost importance. The Standards Committee proposed a piece of work to look at social media training and what more can be done to

guide and support members in their use of social media platforms and to ensure conducts and behaviour are being considered in usage.

Accordingly it would be proposed a short task and finish group be established to look specifically at issues of social media, with a report being brought back to the Standards Committee of factors for elected members to consider and perhaps the preparation of some useful guidance material that members can take into account.

It would be proposed the Task and Finish Group be comprised of three meetings:

- (1) A meeting to look at specifically at the training provided for elected members and the materials available.
- (2) A session to look specifically at work that could be undertaken to address social media and the code of conduct concerns and to agree next steps
- (3) A final session to agree the outcome of the Task and Finish Group prior to its commending to Standards Committee for approval.

The Monitoring Officer will liaise with members of the Standards Committee to find a convenient date for these sessions to be held.

Financial Impacts:

There will be no financial impacts associated with this report.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

An Integrated Impact Assessment is not required for this report.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

No implications

Workforce Impacts:

No implications

Legal Impacts:

The Council has a duty to establish and maintain a Standards Committee as defined by legislation as set out in the Standards Committees Rules and Regulations 2001 and the Standards Committee (Wales) Amendment Regulations 2006. The role of the Standards Committee is to promote and

maintain high standards of conduct by Councillors, Co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor Representatives.

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item

Recommendations:

That Members note the current training that members receive in respect of social media and agree to establishing a Task and Finish Group to specifically look at the issues of social media, with the aim that a report be brought to the Standards Committee with recommendations for elected members to consider.

Appendices:

None

List of Background Papers:

None

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