



## Improving digital citizenship: A practical guide for councillors

Social media has become an important public space, where councillors share political information and engage with other councillors, support officers and residents. But it also opens the door for abuse, harassment and intimidation, along with the spread of misinformation. This guide provides practical advice and resources for councillors as they continue to navigate this space.

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### What is digital citizenship?

Social media has become an important public space, a place where councillors share political information and engage with other councillors, support officers and residents. Social media has the potential to improve democracy by facilitating bigger, freer and more open conversations and by allowing representatives to communicate directly with citizens. But it also opens the door for abuse, harassment and intimidation, along with the swift spread of mis and disinformation that can impact local democracy.

The UK Government's [Online Harms White Paper \(https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harm-s-white-paper\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harm-s-white-paper) defines disinformation as the spread of false information to deceive deliberately. Misinformation is referred to as the inadvertent sharing of false information. Both can refer to false information about a

policy or an issue (for example, misleading or false information about COVID-19) or the spread of rumours about a person (this includes, for example, character assassination).

Online harassment, intimidation and abuse, and the spread of mis and disinformation, are now major challenges to local democracy. They undermine productive engagement between candidates or elected officials and citizens, exacerbate distrust and polarisation in politics, and present further barriers to political participation. With those from under-represented groups reporting disproportionate levels of both online and offline abuse and intimidation, this represents a challenge to increasing the diversity of our local representatives.

Due to its pervasive nature and wide reach, the harassment, abuse and intimidation of individuals in public life are attracting attention in the UK and worldwide. National and international efforts have been made to improve police training and increase awareness and protection. But the majority of initiatives deal with the abuse once it has already occurred. Meanwhile, the nature and far-reaching consequences of harassment and intimidation demand a different approach; one that is preventive, proactive and positive.

Improving digital citizenship is a key element of the civility in public life work by the LGA, WLGA, COSLA and NILGA, and is becoming increasingly important as our online interactions grow and as new information technologies are becoming major forms in which citizens, councillors and officials communicate.

Digital citizenship is about engaging in appropriate and responsible behaviour when using technology and encouraging others to do so as well. It encompasses digital literacy, ethics, etiquette, online safety, norms, rights, culture and more.

Developing digital citizenship requires us to improve online political communications. It is about expressing our opinions while respecting others' rights and personas and avoiding putting them at risk or causing unnecessary distress. It is about respecting freedom of speech and disagreement while condemning abuse.

This guide provides practical advice and resources for councillors, while its partner publication 'Improving Digital Citizenship – Research and Best Practice' provides helpful background and research, and looks at the good work going on in the UK and abroad to make a difference.

The following advice and resources are based on the most recent research and best practice available, and on advice from councillors and officers themselves on what has worked.

## **Advice from councillors and officers**

### **Choosing platforms**

It is helpful to understand that there are differences in the way platforms are designed that make them more or less suitable for certain purposes. For example:

- platforms such as Facebook serve as micro-blogs, better suited for local groups.
- Twitter is more suitable to engage with larger, general audiences. Information on Twitter tends to travel faster and further but the character limit makes it difficult to use it to engage in meaningful discussions.
- Instagram facilitates photo and video sharing via its mobile app and it is quickly growing in political importance. However, while its visual nature makes it a helpful tool to engage audiences, it limits its use for substantive engagement.

There will be other platforms relevant to this arena as technology and trends develop, but this guide provides universally applicable principles which should help users to competently navigate online interactions.

## Setting boundaries

Elected councillors and support officers frequently mention that members of the public have different opinions or understanding of what is and is not acceptable online behaviour. While some individuals engage in abusive behaviour intending to intimidate, some others simply fail to understand the impact of their behaviour. This, of course, does not excuse any abuse, but can explain why it can be challenging for some people to recognise when they are being abusive.

Councillors suggest that having clear guidelines on what constitutes online harassment, abuse and intimidation will help to call out abuse and to implement consistent measures to tackle it. It was noted that councillors are influential in their communities and that by communicating respectfully with others they can help to generate positive engagement between councillors and residents.

Some councillors indicate that they find it useful to limit their interactions with individuals behaving poorly by responding once with factual information and/or to refer back to the code of conduct or rules of engagement and not responding again if the abuse continues. In cases when abuse continues despite the polite response from the councillor, they find it useful to start screenshotting comments so they cannot be deleted and denied later on but without further engagement. On the occasions that the abuse escalates, it is useful to have a record of such communications that will serve as evidence if there is a need to raise a formal complaint.

## Setting expectations

Support officers mentioned that councillors often do not know or feel that being active on social media is a choice and not a statutory requirement of the job. It is important that councillors are reassured that while social media can be a helpful tool for engagement, it is not essential and alternative methods of communication including email or surgeries are also valid.

It is important that councillors work with their council communications teams to understand local approaches to the use of social media. Guidance and protocols will often be available to help members engage

with the public and each other.

The fast-moving nature of social media has raised the expectation of constant engagement. It has been noted by councillors and support officers that it is useful to set times to check and respond to social media messages and to set clear expectations about what members of the public can and cannot expect from councillors on each platform.

In a detailed review of a random sample of Facebook pages of different elected representatives, it was noted that some include clear messages on the aim and scope of the page. For example, some indicate that the page aims to communicate activities related to the role of councillor, that the councillor prefers all casework sent over email or that they will respond during particular hours and days of the week. Others plainly state that the aim is to communicate information and that they will not engage in any discussion in the forum. Setting specific rules of engagement, as the ones presented later in this report, sends a clear message to users on what to expect and help councillors set boundaries.

## Tone

Setting clear boundaries concerning times to engage on social media also help councillors to practice self-restraint. Support officers indicate that they frequently encourage councillors not to respond immediately to any post, especially if they are abusive, and to add “be kind” messages when issues arise which offers a clear reminder to those engaging. Additionally, taking time before answering improves assertiveness - expressing any point of view in a way that is clear and direct while still respecting others - helping councillors to minimise conflict and gain back control over the emotional reactions that can initially be triggered by a post.

Assertive communication is a very good way to defuse conflict by detaching emotions from content. Controversial issues are more likely to attract disagreement and, unfortunately, motivate some individuals to engage in abusive behaviour. Disagreement and persuasion are at the core of politics. When confrontation happens, it can prove useful as

both parties need to negotiate to reach an agreement. But the line between confrontation, intimidation and abuse needs to be respected and not confused with freedom of expression.

An assertive approach to communicate could be to ask individuals to specifically indicate what elements of the policy or decision they do not like. This strategy, in most cases, redirects the conversation to the policy realm, providing the councillor with opportunities to explain the decision-making process or to refer the individual to relevant information.

## Accuracy

Additionally, support officers and councillors mentioned the importance of ensuring that the information they share is accurate. For this purpose, they recommend using official press statements and avoiding ambiguity in information shared. Councillors are leaders in their community and as such, they should aim to lead by example, which includes avoiding the spread of unverified rumours, mis and disinformation as that would undermine the legitimacy of decision-making and cause problems within communities, such as in relation to public health or community safety.

Rumours about fellow councillors can also be very damaging for their reputation, safety and mental health. The guidelines listed in the next section present some useful steps to follow to prevent sharing mis and disinformation and can also be applied to avoid the spread of rumours about councillors.

## Online meetings

After the COVID-19 pandemic started and especially during the lockdown, meetings have moved to a great degree online. This presented councillors and support officers with important challenges on how to foster positive and fruitful interactions in such settings. Some useful practices identified include:

- know who is participating in online meetings by registering users and monitoring the chat
- establish a digital protocol to mute users when necessary, manage interventions, assign the role of moderators and established

consequences for breaching the protocol

- record meetings as they discourage certain people saying things out of order and also, it serves as evidence when abuse happens.

In Wales, **The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021** (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2021/297/made>) establishes the legal basis for holding multi location meetings of Councils and committees. The Act enables Councils to choose the method of attending meetings ranging from wholly physical, through hybrid to wholly virtual. The requirements for broadcasting are also set out in the Act. The statutory guidance from the Welsh Government (forthcoming) sets out in more detail how members can participate in multi-location meetings.

Proper training on online communication and technologies of information has been identified as a key element in improving digital citizenship. The **Councillors' guide to handling intimidation** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-intimidation>) includes practical advice on how to use privacy settings and other tools on different social media platforms. The LGA **Online and hybrid meeting** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/online-and-hybrid-meetings>) hub has information about various video and audio platforms, case studies and access to support for councils and councillors using online meeting technologies. In Scotland, the Improvement Service has published a **resource for political groups on remote working** ([https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/21225/Working-remotely-with-political-groups.pdf](https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/21225/Working-remotely-with-political-groups.pdf)) and guidance for councillors on **holding virtual surgeries** ([https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/14519/Virtual-Surgeries.pdf](https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/14519/Virtual-Surgeries.pdf)).

## Tools for councillors

### Councillors' guide to handling intimidation

The LGA and the **Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)** (<https://www.wlga.gov.uk/>) jointly developed this resource following advice from councils, councillors and other council



representative organisations, as well as national organisations such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and National Counter Terrorism Security Organisation.

The guide covers topics such as how to handle abuse, both face-to-face, letters or online, and the legal and practical remedies, including the nature of the criminal offences involved and will be continuously updated with the latest advice and information available.

We will shortly be updating this guide to ensure it is also applicable across Scotland and Northern Ireland.

## Handling online abuse

The **councillors' guide to handling intimidation** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-intimidation>) includes advice on handling online abuse. This is **available in graphic format** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/images/43.5%20Online%20abuse.png>) in both English and **Welsh** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/digital-citizenship>), and is summarised in 10 easy steps to follow:

1. **Set expectations** – point people to your rules of engagement and apply these consistently.
2. **Lead by example** – do not post comments that could be considered abusive, and avoid posting false or unverified information.
3. **Consider content** – some content will be more controversial than others. Consider before posting how you will manage engagement with this, for example only engaging in comments on the policy itself or directing people to consultation documents.
4. **Defuse conflict** – waiting to respond can take the heat out of situations, as can reframing your own language.
5. **Know when to step back** - Remember you do not have to engage with abusive or threatening behaviour. You can set the record straight with factual information if you wish, but you can step away when you want to.
6. **Protect your privacy** – set different passwords for different accounts, and do not post information that can allow people to identify your whereabouts outside of official council business.



7. **Understand privacy settings** – there is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.
8. **Get and give support** – where you feel able, provide support to fellow councillors online, and reach out to colleagues and your council for support where needed.
9. **Record abuse**- screenshot comments and keep a record of abusive or threatening communications.
10. **Report serious issues** - if you feel unable to deal with online abuse yourself or have any concerns about your safety, report this to your council or the police.

Rules of engagement

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For more information on the LGA's work on handling abuse on social media and digital citizenship visit: [www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life](https://www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life)

REF 43.5

## Rules of engagement

These rules are designed to give all users a clear 'code' by which they should operate, with consequences for users who fail to abide by them. We have produced **accompanying digital citizenship infographics (https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/digital-citizenship)** in English and Welsh so that the rules can be pinned to the social media profile of a councillor or candidate. The rules of engagement should include:

- a) a clear message with regards to the aim of the forum, page or account
- b) acknowledgement of terms and conditions of participation

c) rules of participation

**Rule 1:**

- Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

**Rule 2:**

- Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

**Rule 3:**

- Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

**Rule 4:**

- Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

**Rule 5:**

- For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously

d) consequences for rule-breaking

e) information about what users can expect in terms of responses and preferred form of contact.

**Rules of engagement**

Welcome to my page, which aims to communicate my activities as a councillor.

If you wish to be a part of this online community, you must agree to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

**RULE 1**  
 Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

**RULE 2**  
 Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

**RULE 3**  
 Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

**RULE 4**  
 Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

**RULE 5**  
 For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously.

If any of these rules are broken, page admins reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report content to the police if necessary.

It may not be possible to respond to all queries on this page due to time constraints - if you have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.



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REF 43.4

Councillors should aim to avoid the spread of unverified rumours, mis and disinformation. Engaging in such practices undermines the reputation of the council and can endanger the lives and wellbeing of others. Current times are characterised by the need to process and appraise large volumes of information constantly but information can be compromised easily. Moreover, technology does not always facilitate identifying what information is true and which information is not. This short guide supports councillors to be mindful when reading and posting information online.

**Step 1 check the source:**

- Look for the source and be suspicious of unrecognised websites, even if they look professional.

**Step 2 triangulate information:**

- Check if the same information has been published on other known, reliable websites.

**Step 3 read beyond the headlines:**

- Never share information if you have not read the full article. False information often hides below attention-grabbing headlines.

**Step 4 correct falsehoods:**

- If you see something on social media that is not true, calmly correct it by providing factual information, especially where people may look to you as a trusted community representative.

**Step 5 be constructive:**

- Websites and articles can mix facts with inaccurate information. Before sharing, check that the content conveys a constructive message that matches the headline

If you are not sure if something is accurate, it is best not to share or circulate.

## Model Code of Conduct

All councillors must follow a code of conduct to protect the democratic role of councillors, encourage good conduct and safeguard the public's trust in local government. These encourage councillors to act with integrity and honesty, treat people fairly and with respect and lead by example in a way that secures public confidence in the role of councillor.

Each nation has its own councillor code of conduct: in England, the LGA has developed a model code for local adaptation; in Wales there is a statutory Code; in Scotland the Code is approved by the Scottish Parliament and applies to all councillors; and in Northern Ireland each council adopts the same code:

- **England, via the LGA** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020>)
- **Wales Statutory Model Code** (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2008/788/made#:~:text=Section%2050%20%283%29%20of%20the%20Act%20entitles%20the,section%2050%20%282%29%20and%20%283%29%20of%20the%20Act.>) and **Guidance from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales** (<https://www.ombudsman.wales/guidance-policies/>)
- **Scotland – The Standards Commission for Scotland** (<https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/codes-of-conduct/councillors-code-of-conduct>)
- **Northern Ireland** (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/ni-local-government-code-conduct-councillors>)

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