

## **Local Government Association Guide to identify how social media can help the work of councillors**

### To help you represent your ward.

- As a councillor you may find yourself needing to connect with a range of people. Traditionally, this has been done through a number of ways such as leafleting, knocking on doors, getting your picture in the local paper or meeting people in the street.
- These ways can still work for sections of society. However, the ability to connect with people through social media means that you can reach different demographics; for example, the working mother-of-two who may be too busy to read the local paper but relaxes talking to friends on Facebook.
- A blog written by a councillor means you are able to keep residents informed.

### To help mobilise support for a campaign

- When something happens in your ward residents will often start a campaign. That can be over a school closure, an unpopular planning application or to get a problem with traffic lights sorted out.
- More common are Facebook protest groups that start over a single issue and can become popular overnight. They can be dismissed as 'clicktivism.' This means that the click of a mouse to 'like' a page does not take much effort. But its ease is also its strength; in some cases thousands of people mobilise public support at short notice. As a councillor it helps to be aware of a groundswell of opinion that is taking place online. It can also be something that you may want to join or even instigate.

### To test the temperature of public opinion

- An important part of the councillor's duties is to see what people are thinking about a particular issue. Nationally, focus groups and polls can work out with a fair degree of accuracy the public mood. As a councillor you don't have that luxury. One of the strengths of social media is that it is so immediate and can yield feedback often within minutes.
- Running a search on a platform like Twitter can see if a topic is generating discussion. Road works which could be better managed often end up

being talked about online well before they present themselves as issues in the councillor's postbag. So being sharp and alert and searching for a subject can give you a flavour of what people are thinking. Of course, if you want consultation, asking a question online may help to generate responses.

#### To help shape or explain a policy

- Once the temperature has been tested, it can help in the complex process of shaping policy and decision making. Once this forms a proposal, this can then be shared online in a place where it can be argued and debated. Those misunderstandings about a plan? They can be challenged or corrected in real time.

#### To help shape the scrutiny process

- Scrutiny is a vital part of what local government does. It acts as a watchdog and can call in decisions made by the Executive for greater examination. Often, the issues that scrutiny tackles are varied, niche and hard to get people interested in.
- Live tweeting a scrutiny meeting and posting a link to an agenda helps to shine a light on the debates and discussions.

#### To let people know about the decision-making process

- Decisions are made at council meetings that are often not that easy for people to attend. They can be hard to get to and difficult to understand.
- By live streaming a meeting, as is done in York through the council's webcasts, you can reach an audience far bigger than that which could fit into a room.

#### To gather casework

- Nationally, people are moving away from reporting a problem to a councillor at a ward surgery once a month. People expect to be able to report a problem far quicker.
- As the conversations are taking place increasingly online, you need to be able to listen to what people are saying there. Without a Twitter or a Facebook account you may not be as well informed as you could be.