



BLYTH TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Introduction

Blyth Town Council receive queries via various forms of communication, for example; email, letter and telephone. Officers respond to these on a daily basis. Whilst the Council does operate a Facebook page, this is used for "getting messages out/information" to people, and the Council does not reply to comments because of the limited available resources, but it does provide users with alternative means of communication.

As we do not reply the Council inform users as such e.g. "If you would like to get in touch, please email info@blythtowncouncil.org.uk"

This policy is intended to open the door to social media use by Councillors should they wish to do so in order that they can offer another communication vehicle for the residents of Blyth. There is one simple rule – don't post any message on social media that you wouldn't happily say in a public meeting. Should Councillors wish to do this form of communication then a separate page must be set up to denote their role and must highlight that any views are from them as individuals and not necessarily the views/policy of the Council.

Included in the policy is a list of do's and don'ts as well as a checklist for Councillors.

Do:

- **talk** to residents, staff and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly)
- **trust** your teams and staff to use social media
- **be responsible** at all times
- **be respectful** at all times, too
- **innovate** – different approaches work for different people
- have a **personality** – corporate speak or just issuing press releases won't work well on social media
- **share** other people's helpful content and links
- **credit** other people's work, ideas and links
- **listen** (social media is designed to be a two-way channel, just like any good conversation)
- **ask** your own questions. Seek feedback from your residents (but make sure you share the results with them)
- have a **rota** where appropriate – share the load and you'll get more from your accounts
- adhere to your existing **Members Protocols within your handbook**
- **recognise** when is the best time in a conversation to feel it will be of benefit e.g. when the conversation is going nowhere, is heated or

where further/clearer explanation is required from another media source to suggest this to your Facebook or other media correspondent

- **talk** to the Office staff if needed – they are there to help you
- **learn** from others – there is rich learning of good practice social media use across local government via organisations such as the LGA, **comms2point0** and Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (**IEWM**).
- and more than anything, do use social media in the spirit in which it was intended – to **engage, openly and honestly**.

Don't

- **broadcast** or talk at people. Your residents will soon spot broadcasts and respond accordingly
- **block** social media – social media is not a risk, blocking its use is a risk
- try to **cover up** mistakes, be honest and you'll get more respect for it in the long run
- build accounts and just hope people will come – sometimes it is best to go to the places where your audiences are already having conversations
- **assume** that social media will look after itself – you will need to invest time, enthusiasm and energy to make it work. And don't leave your accounts unattended for long spells
- post content which will **embarrass** your Council or yourself
- **ignore** legal advice, it's there to help you
- think that a **disclaimer** in your bio will save you from potential legal action, it won't
- expect that the public are all users of new technology and that flexibility must be shown in the source of media used.
- **share your passwords** with anyone.
- forget that **social media is 24/7** – users will have different responsibilities etc during the day and night and may not all communicate at the same time.

Checklist for Councillors

Be a person

In the words of Digital Specialist **Euan Semple**, "Organisations don't tweet, people do". You are likely to be more effective if your social media profile is you (with a picture of you) rather than an organisation with a logo.

Don't worry about reaching everyone in your ward

Social media will be more effective in some wards than others. University towns, urban areas with good broadband and mobile connections, and a working age population tend to work best. Wards with an older population

and poor internet connectivity tend not to be so effective at reaching your ward. However don't let this stop you as connections are getting continuously improving as we move towards a higher level of **digital inclusion**.

Don't let it replace your traditional work

To be an effective Councillor you won't stop meeting people and posting leaflets simply because you are posting online. The traditional work of a Councillor still has to be done. You will know your residents best—consider which channel works best for them to connect with you, online and offline.

Think about the platform you'll use

If people in your ward are keen Facebook users then think seriously about Facebook. Twitter is popular among politicians because it's easy to use and connects people really well. Whichever one you choose, learn one at a time before even thinking of trying something else. You will know your residents better than anyone else so ask them which channel works best for them.

See how other Councillors use it

Watch and learn from other Councillors who are using social media. Have a chat to them. You'll very often find they will be happy to talk. Even to those from different parties.

Don't be a slogan machine

There is a really important decision to be taken over how political to be. You may have been elected on a party political ticket. But you are also a rounded human being. Social media is a chance for you to show your human side. Just posting party political content is likely to switch many people off and you may be talking only to the party faithful.

Have a conversation

Social media works best as a two-way conversation connecting people and sharing information. Good Councillors do this everyday face-to-face with residents—social media should be no different to this.

Don't wait for people to come to you

You've got your Facebook profile or your Twitter profile. People won't just come flocking to you. Run a search on your chosen profile for the name of your ward or an issue. Make a connection. Join a Facebook group set-up by residents. Comment on a blog, a website or a video clip.

Think about times when you won't post

From experience, many elected members say that Friday and Saturday nights are not always the best time to post overtly political messages. You won't always get the most rounded debates. Many Councillors post sparingly on religious holidays.

To post in meetings or not?

Some authorities frown on posting from social media in meetings. Check the situation where you are. Residents, residents groups, journalists and bloggers are being encouraged to use social media from meetings. So adding your voice to the conversation may be a good thing as part of democracy. If you can post an update from a meeting and it doesn't hamper your role in that meeting then it's something to think about.

Don't have a row

Robust debate is fine from time-to-time and it's part of the cut and thrust of local politics. Most people can accept that. But remember how this debate is playing out to passers-by who are not interested in the detail of the issue. They are likely to be switched off. Take the row offline with a phone call or an email.

Don't be abusive

An absolute 'no no' is abusing people online. It doesn't work. It will make you look awful and is a sure-fire way to land you in trouble with your electorate, the party and the Council. Be professional. Don't say anything you wouldn't be happy saying in a public meeting with the Press there.

Don't discuss case work detail

Case work can be reported to you on social media. Everything from uncollected rubbish and a cracked paving slab to concerns about child protection. As a good rule of thumb, ask residents to tell you the detail of an issue offline. Social media platforms usually have an easy-to-use way to talk one-to-one. Email and telephone can come into play too.

Pictures work

People respond really well to pictures. They don't have to be print quality. They don't have to be posed. If you are on a ward walk post some pictures. Include the people you are with if they are happy with that. Post pictures that show your human side too. That sunrise you just noticed. Your dog. Things that make you human.

Enjoy it

It's not meant to be scary. It's not meant to be hard work. Relax. Be yourself. Be a responsible elected member. Enjoy it.