

# Social media guidance for elected members

**Welcome to your social media guidance - we want you to use this guide to help you get the best out of social media. We want to encourage you to use social media and give you the freedom to support the council with the proper guidelines.**

Social media is a website or app that helps you create and share content and communicate with others. Social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, Nextdoor and YappApp. It also includes SharePoint, Teams and Yammer. This list is not exhaustive and consists of any platform, website and application that focuses on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. The guidance also covers any new platforms which will be developed in the future.

You should follow this guidance if you're an elected member or co-opted member of Barnsley Council. It's also applicable to candidates who are standing to be elected to Barnsley Council.

For information, throughout this guide, the terms 'we' and 'us' are used to describe the Communications and Marketing Service.

## **Key points:**

- Whatever you say on social media, you're likely to be considered as representing your role as an elected member of Barnsley Council– even when on your own personal pages. We want you to feel confident and safe using social media as a communication channel.
- When posting on social platforms, your integrity is on display for people to see, so be ethical, respectful, truthful, and decent. Anything you publish must be true, not misleading, and all claims must be substantiated and approved.
- Protecting the reputation of Barnsley Council is an essential part of your role as an elected member. Do not post any confidential information on any social platforms. If the council has not officially released the information, don't discuss it. This includes financial data, service data and information, and legal information.
- If you're unsure whether to post, comment on or share something, err on the side of caution and don't.
- Your interactions with the public can be used and re-used on social media. This could include emails, pictures and videos. Bear this in mind in how you interact and respond to the public in your day-to-day role.

## **Your personal social media pages**

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You may have separate social media pages – one as an elected member and one as your own personal page.

## **Showing that you're an elected member of Barnsley Council**

We want you to be proud to be an elected member of Barnsley Council. This is fine if you want to show this on your own social media pages as part of your own profile.

It's good practice to have a disclaimer to clarify that comments are your personal views and do not represent the council's view. This makes it clear that you may understand the council better, but you're not making official declarations. Use wording in your profile such as 'Views expressed are my own and not in my role as a councillor'.

If you're carrying out a legitimate role that involves posting comments on social media, for example, as a trade union representative or a community action group representative etc., you need to make clear in which capacity you're making your posts.

## Using social media for council business

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We're starting to see more and more elected members using social media as a channel to engage with their communities.

Your posts, tweets or comments on social media about the council or your role as an elected member are treated the same way as any other communications. They are covered by your [Code of Conduct for Elected Members](#).

If anyone considers that your posts, tweets or comments on social media have failed to comply with the [Code of Conduct for Elected Members](#), you may be subject to a complaint to the council's monitoring officer.

## Your responsibility when using social media

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Even if you're using your personal social media page, the world will always see you as a reflection of the council.

Anything you post on a social media site is your responsibility. This includes content you create, share, and people's comments and reactions linked to your content. Content can be there permanently, regardless of whether you try to remove it. There'll always be a permanent record of everything you post. Irrespective of your privacy settings, posts can, and often do, become publicly available through screenshots, hacking and other methods.

We firmly believe that although people have differing views on many issues, any form of online bullying is not acceptable on any platform. Consider what you're posting, how you manage your page, and how this may reflect the council's values and reputation.

Do not engage in content that is classed as online bullying under our [social media acceptable use policy](#) and brings the council into disrepute or has the potential to adversely affect the council's reputation or business. This includes content you create, share, and people's comments and reactions linked to your content. Online bullying includes inappropriate content concerning the council's services, council employees and other elected members, residents, businesses, customers or suppliers. You'll be asked to remove the content, and the council may investigate and start disciplinary action against you. Depending on the content, we may also report it to South Yorkshire Police.

If you're tagged in a post or tweet that is considered defamatory, derogatory and offensive against the council, then please follow the guidance on dealing with unacceptable behaviour in the no place for hate section.

### **Examples of this could be:**

- 1) "Thanks to the councillor for coming to support me today in my role. Some councillors don't care and are only in it for backhanders and brown envelopes."
- 2) "Two men living together should not be allowed in my community. We should get rid of them all. If I ever see any of them in my area, they better watch their backs. I'll be waiting for them."

If you had posted comment 1, we would instruct you to remove them, and it would be referred to the council's monitoring officer as a breach of your [Code of Conduct for Elected Members](#).

Hate and harassment can be criminal or non-criminal and include offensive comments or images on social media or text messages. If you had posted comment 2, you would be reported to South Yorkshire Police for hate crimes. It would also be referred to the council's monitoring officer as a breach of your [Code of Conduct for Elected Members](#).

### **Share our news**

We promote the council's work across the borough. We encourage you to share information and help us to spread the word about what's happening in Barnsley. Unless it's part of your role within the council, you should never make official announcements on behalf of the council via any communication channel.

### **Joining social media groups**

If you want to join a social media group that has a conflict of interest with the council's services, such as a campaign group, you should follow the guidance on personal interests in the [Code of Conduct for elected members](#).

## **Dos and don'ts at a glance**

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(adapted from the [LGA website](#))

### **Do:**

- talk to residents, staff and others. And do answer their questions (quickly and honestly)

- be responsible at all times
- be respectful at all times, too
- 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
- share photographs, images, video footage and comments of elected members or employees with their consent and within [UK GDPR regulations](#). You can also [read more information about consent on the intranet](#)
- 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)
- adhere to your existing HR policies such as the [Code of Conduct for elected members](#) and this social media guidance
- understand your responsibility for the content you create, content you share, and people's comments and reactions linked to your content
- check your privacy settings and make sure you understand what people can see and what they can do with your content.
- follow the council's [Information and security and computer usage policy](#) and [Code of Conduct for elected members](#) when using council equipment and your council login.
- talk to your communications team – they are there to help you
- 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
- raise council-related issues on social media. Use the process in place to get more information and facts
- say things that could damage the council's reputation or other organisations or brands associated with the council
- divulge confidential information about, or belonging to, the council, people who use our services, employees or other elected members.
- impersonate other elected members or employees on social media sites and forums
- 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
- 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
- share your passwords with anyone

- forget that social media is 24/7 – just because you leave at 5pm doesn't mean the world stops or that residents won't be active. If your account is only staffed 9-5 then you should say so on your profile.

## Legal guidance on using social media

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Comments made on a public forum are in the public domain. Updating your site settings to private will not protect you if you're found in breach of this guidance.

Consider whether your comments or actions could be considered defamatory, derogatory or offensive, as this could result in somebody taking legal action against you as well as against the council or making a formal complaint about you. If someone is taking legal proceedings against an elected member or employee because of their defamatory comments or actions on a social media site or online media outlet, the council is entitled, in appropriate cases where the person has acted reasonably and in good faith, to support them in defending those legal proceedings.

Tribunals and courts can consider communications recorded on social media sites. It's highly likely that online content, postings and messages will be used as evidence, regardless of the privacy settings of your page.

Breaches of the [Code of Conduct for elected members](#) renders you liable to action being taken by the Appeals Awards and Standards Regulatory Board. Failure to observe the conduct and behaviour specified in this code may also render you liable to disciplinary action being taken by your own political group.

Be aware of [UK GDPR regulations](#) and consent.

## No place for hate in Barnsley

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People are free to express their opinion, and most people who follow our pages do this in a balanced way. It's okay for people not to like the service we deliver or to disagree with decisions, and they are free to communicate this. We won't act against these comments, as frustrating as they may be.

We do not accept content that is defamatory, slanderous, discriminatory, inciting or

intimidatory behaviour, or is classed as misinformation (false, misleading or out-of-context material regardless of the motivation behind it) or disinformation (a deliberate attempt to mislead using material that the deceiver knows is untrue, designed to be widely shared).

## **Managing unacceptable content on social media pages**

Our council social media pages are governed by our [social media acceptable use policy](#) (social media house rules). It covers all of the council's pages and outlines the standards we expect on our social media sites; it's a key enforcement step in establishing a positive behaviour change on online channels.

## **Managing situations when you're out in the community**

You might encounter situations where people try to stop you from doing your role or start taking pictures or filming you when you're out in communities. Almost everyone has a smartphone, which means nearly everyone has a camera. That means the odds of people filming you at work are pretty high.

This can be an unsettling experience. Your behaviour – positive or negative – can get filmed and posted online. It takes seconds and has the potential to catch the attention of thousands of people.

Most of our work happens in places open to the public. That means anyone filming you at work isn't breaking the law, strictly speaking. They could be breaking the law if they're filming you in a place which has sensitive information or activities happening in it. Examples include in a family centre with children in the area or in a meeting discussing someone who uses our services.

Follow this guide on how to deal with it:

- It's essential to keep calm, even if it isn't always easy.
- Be polite, respectful and courteous – even if they are not.
- Ask them to stop taking pictures or recording a video of you.
- Offer them a point of contact for more information on the work you're doing.
- If possible, remove yourself from the situation quickly and calmly.
- Do not retaliate with a heated conversation or by filming them back.
- Do not be disrespectful to people or mock them.
- Let your group leader and monitoring officer know what happened as soon as possible.  
Write down the date, time, location, a description of the person filming you, and a statement of what happened.

## **Managing unacceptable content on non-council social media pages**

We can't control or manage non-council platforms or users, but we'll take steps to try to remove unacceptable content or correct the information. This could include approaching the organisation, site moderators, or the person who has posted it directly to take action. We'll also report it to the

platform directly. We'll work with colleagues in legal services to consider whether any legal action can be taken.

We can only approach people using our Barnsley Council accounts if they like and follow the main Barnsley Council account. This will sometimes limit how we can approach pages. As a Communications and Marketing service, we'll not use our personal accounts to do this.

Please be our eyes on social media. If you see anything unacceptable towards the council:

- Screenshot the content and get a link to the thread and the page (make sure you get the platform name, date and time on it) – this is important so we can investigate it. Please send this to us at [communication@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:communication@barnsley.gov.uk)
- Report the content using the platform's reporting process.

## **Unacceptable content directed at our elected members**

The council has a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to take care of your health, safety and wellbeing. Customers and residents have the right to expect the best service from the council, and the council will always try to provide that service politely and respectfully. In return, we expect the same treatment. This includes any content made on social media platforms.

Unfortunately, our elected members are sometimes subjected to online abuse. This content could include a comment, image or video. More extreme content could show our elected members being filmed doing their roles. It could show situations out of context and spread misinformation and disinformation. What might be seen as just a comment or someone showing their frustrations is still directed at someone just doing their role.

We're clear on our stance - we'll not tolerate any violent or aggressive behaviour, discriminatory or hate crime comments towards an elected member, be it online or face to face.

## **Steps to take**

### **If the content is on your social media pages**

- Screenshot the content and get a link to the thread and the page (make sure you get the platform name, date and time on it) – this is important for us to have this for further investigation.
- Fill in a [violence and aggression report](#) as soon as possible. This allows us to make an official record and get you the help and support you might need.
- Report the content using the platform's reporting process.
- Delete the comment.
- Block their access to your social media pages.
- Check and review your personal privacy settings. Stay safe online and consider who is looking at your pages and your details. This includes any photographs and videos you share and your links to your family and friends pages.
- Speak to your group leader and the Monitoring Officer for support.



- Send evidence to your group leader, the Monitoring Officer and [communications@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:communications@barnsley.gov.uk). We'll look at how we take steps to support you.
- Depending on the content, we'll consider whether it needs highlighting to legal or the police.
- Follow the guidance in our [Personal Safety and Violence and Aggression at work – Code of Practice](#), particularly the escalation process where a threat is made.
- Get support from our [Well@Work service](#) if you need it.

### **If the content is on a public social media channel**

- Screenshot the content and get a link to the thread and the page (make sure you get the platform name, date and time on it) – this is important for us to have this for further investigation.
- Report the content using the platform's reporting process.
- Fill in a [violence and aggression report](#) as soon as possible. This allows us to make an official record and get you the help and support you might need.
- Block their access to your social media pages.
- Check and review your personal privacy settings. Stay safe online and consider who is looking at your pages and your details. This includes any photographs and videos you share and your links to your family and friends' pages.
- Speak to your group leader and the Monitoring Officer for support.
- Send evidence to your group leader, the Monitoring Officer and [communications@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:communications@barnsley.gov.uk). We'll look at how we take steps to support you.
- We'll contact the page for you if we can and try to get the comment removed. We'll also remind them of their responsibility as page administrators. We might not be able to do this.
- Depending on the content, we'll consider whether it needs highlighting to legal, our health and safety service or the police.
- Follow the guidance in our [Personal Safety and Violence and Aggression at work – Code of Practice](#), particularly the escalation process where a threat is made.
- Get support from our [Well@Work service](#) if you need it.

### **How we'll support you**

We'll provide support and guidance to anyone affected by online hate and abuse, such as comments about them on social media sites in connection with their role.

This includes support to complete the actions in the No place for hate in Barnsley section and Health and Safety and wellbeing support through the [Personal Safety and Violence and Aggression at work – Code of Practice](#).

Your group leader and the Monitoring Officer will support you.

Our legal services will try and support you in dealing with a difficult situation and advise you on applying the law where possible.

Our Governance and Member Services will support you in understanding and applying the code of conduct and other relevant policies.



## More information

The LGA has a [Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation](#)

If you need information or support, please contact

- Our Communications and Marketing team at [communications@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:communications@barnsley.gov.uk) or call (01226) 773443.
- Our Monitoring Officer at [sukdaveghuman@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:sukdaveghuman@barnsley.gov.uk) or call 07796 476796.
- Our Legal Services team at [LegalServices@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:LegalServices@barnsley.gov.uk)
- Our Governance and Member Support team at [Governance@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:Governance@barnsley.gov.uk) or [MembersEnquiries@barnsley.gov.uk](mailto:MembersEnquiries@barnsley.gov.uk)