Why get involved?

Social media guidance for elected members

Behind all the buzz words and jargon, social media is basically just a conversation...

An essential part of being a good councillor is knowing how to communicate well and get your message across to different audiences. Social media is just another tool to help you do this.

You won’t reach everyone via social media, but it will give you access to far more conversations and a far larger audience than ever before.

The role of social media is likely to be different for each of you depending on your ward and constituents. Social media platforms are also developing quickly, and ever changing in popularity, so a ‘definitive guide’ would be impossible to produce.

This document aims to offer some general advice on good practice and point you towards places to find more help online.

Statistics from the ONS show that 87% of UK adults use the internet daily and that 84% of adults use the internet ‘on the go.’ Research by Ofcom suggests that 70% of the population use social media.

The most common reason for using social media is to find out what is happening in your local area and community and to share content and views.

This means there’s a huge potential audience out there that can be reached by using social media. Almost all UK councils now use social media in an official capacity, because it’s a tried and tested way of reaching out to people.

Social media can be highly influential in shaping a conversation around a place or topic. Over the past few years it has changed the way our residents, partners, communities and colleagues are interacting with the organisation and each other about the issues that interest and affect them.

It also connects people with each other and with what people are saying, doing and thinking, which makes it a fantastic place to network and collaborate, hear the latest news and views from thought leaders in your field, connect with colleagues and partners and create relationships with people and communities you might otherwise never have come across.
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How to get started

You’ve only got a limited amount of time, so it’s best to choose just one or two social media platforms to use and make the most of them. Find out where your residents are, and join the conversation.

It’s always good if you can sit down with someone who uses social media already to get a bit of an understanding of how things work.

The Local Government Association has lots of resources and guides for social media, and there’s plenty of information out there. The following pages give just a brief insight into the world of social media and what’s possible.
The UK's most popular social media sites are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Site</th>
<th>Number of Users</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facebook</strong></td>
<td>41 million users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YouTube</strong></td>
<td>40 million users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Twitter</strong></td>
<td>26 million users</td>
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</table>

**Facebook** – 41 million users
Facebook is the goliath of social media and an established, mainstream communications channel. People spend more time on Facebook per day than any other social media site, and it reaches 94% of the UK’s digital population, by far the highest of any social media! It is a good place to share pretty much anything – videos, information, pictures! Dedicated community ‘pages’ and ‘groups’ are also a great way to get in touch with local people. Find out more about joining Facebook and how it works here.

DCC maintains several Facebook accounts to provide information and to raise awareness of campaigns and consultations. You can find them here.

**YouTube** - 40 million users
Discover, watch and share originally-created videos. Second largest search engine after Google. It's not the best place for hosting a discussion or a debate, but it is good for explaining something, especially if you trying to show people something. Find out more here.

Devon County Council maintains a number of YouTube accounts to provide information and to raise awareness of campaigns and consultations. You can find them here.

**Twitter** - 26 million users
Twitter is a micro-blogging platform which has grown massively in popularity in recent years. Posts are limited to 280 characters, so it is good for short bursts of information and sign posting people. You can follow others, be followed, favourite tweets (posts) others have shared and post links, images and videos. It is a fast-moving, dynamic platform – tweets don’t tend to stay in the limelight for long. Along with Facebook and Instagram, Twitter is one of the ‘Big 3’ of social media. Find out more about using Twitter here.

Devon County Council maintains a number of Twitter accounts to provide information and to raise awareness of campaigns and consultations. You can find them here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Platform</th>
<th>Number of Users</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>26 million</td>
<td>Instagram is a visually focused platform that allows users to share pictures and videos. Many participate using hashtags. <a href="https://www.instagram.com">Find out more about Instagram here.</a> Devon County Council maintains an Instagram account to provide information and to raise awareness of campaigns and consultations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>23.3 million</td>
<td>Snapchat is mainly used for creating multimedia messages referred to as ‘snaps’ that can consist of a photo or a short video, and can be edited to include filters and effects, text captions, and drawings. Its user base is primarily young people, 18 – 33. <a href="https://www.snapchat.com">Find out more here.</a></td>
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**Source of user stats:** [OfCom Online Nation Report 2019](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/home/online-nation-report)
Some top tips to get the most out of social media

The single biggest trick to getting the most from social media is to build your online communities by sharing, listening, being active and being social.

You will need to provide interesting things to read, watch or listen that your residents value and want. Don’t just publish your council press releases here or broadcast what you want your residents to hear.

Be human. It sounds obvious, but people are more likely to warm to you if you act and sound like a real person. Write like you would speak to the person if they were there face to face. Be honest, and approachable. Avoid jargon and council speak. It’s also fine to talk about non-council things, like a TV programme you watched or the latest local sports team victory. It makes you more rounded and a real person. But it is also worth remembering that some subjects can be very emotive!

POSE: Post Once, Share Everywhere. You don’t need to create bespoke content for every single social channel you’re using. You can link your social media accounts between the ‘Big 3’ (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), giving you the option to post on multiple platforms at once. There are also social media management tools such as HootSuite, to help you analyse data and make informed decisions about when, how, where and why to post – but these often come at a cost!

Post regularly. There’s nothing worse than setting up a social media account, just to neglect it and let it stagnate. How often to post depends on the platform you are using. There’s lots of guidance available online, for example this article from Digital Park.

Make sure your message is appropriate to the medium: There has been a lot of crossover between social media platforms in the past few years, but generally, Twitter is for shorter bursts; Instagram and Snapchat are very visual, and Facebook is better for robust, detailed information.

Be interesting. People will only follow and engage with you if you are interesting. Harsh, but true. Talk about where you are and what you’re doing. As a councillor you’ll often be meeting interesting people or talking about things that affect people’s lives, so share the interesting stories on social media.

Remember what goes online tends to stay online. Before you post something, ask yourself “would I stand up and say this at a public meeting, or to a reporter?”

People like photos and videos and they help your content stand out in your audience’s feed, so you’re likely to get higher levels of engagement if you include them in your posts. Don’t forget, its good practice to ask permission before you post a video or photo of someone. If you’re using video, remember that size does matter. Try to keep things short.
Post when your audience is most likely to see it; the best way to find this out is to try different times and see what engagement is like.

Don’t forget to utilise hashtags. Hashtags used to be exclusive to Twitter, but most major social media sites have now adopted them and they’re a great way to expand your audience and gain followers quickly. You can find some useful guidance on this from Hootsuite here.

Share and share alike. Once you’ve posted, get your colleagues and friends to share it, too. Tag anyone or any other business involved by using their handle and they’ll share it. The more people who share the content, the more reach you’ll get. Similarly, it’s good to share other people’s content if relevant.

Don’t just post and forget; measurement is a big part of how to make your social work better and more popular. There are plenty of tools out there to help you track usage, schedule posts and measure effectiveness. All will have varying costs attached, but some to investigate include Tweetdeck, Buffer, Later, and Hootsuite.

The LGA has some really great content on social media. Here are some social media myths busted.

Also consider checking out their top tips and do’s and don’ts for social media.

Live events

A great way to use social media is to host live, scheduled events which you can do for free. The best way to do this is to post on any or all of your platforms, giving a date and time well in advance so people are aware.

You can create a Twitter Chat, or broadcast yourself live on Facebook or Instagram from your phone or PC to answer questions in real-time.

If you’re using Twitter, consider using a #UniqueHashtag to bring attention to your event: this will also allow you to search the hashtag to find relevant questions and comments to respond to.

The Digital Engagement Guide has some great ideas and practical help to use digital and social media in the public sector. Check it out here.