

Social Media Policy

The Shadow Authority recognises that social media is an important way for Members to engage with residents, communities and businesses. Used well, it promotes openness, transparency and participation in local democracy. This Policy has been developed to help Members use social media confidently, responsibly and lawfully while maintaining the high standards of conduct expected of elected representatives.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Social media provides Members with valuable opportunities to communicate with residents, explain Shadow Authority decisions, raise awareness of local issues and encourage participation in local democracy. It enables Members to communicate directly with the communities they represent, respond to local concerns and promote greater public understanding of the Shadow Authority's work.
- 1.2. The purpose of this Policy is to provide practical guidance on the responsible use of social media. It complements the West Surrey Shadow Authority Members' Code of Conduct and should be read alongside the Shadow Authority's Constitution and any guidance issued by the Monitoring Officer. The Policy is intended to support Members in making informed decisions about their online activity. It does not seek to discourage legitimate political debate or restrict freedom of expression, provided that social media is used lawfully and consistently with the standards expected of elected Members.
- 1.3. Social media is constantly evolving. Accordingly, the principles set out in this Policy apply equally to existing and emerging digital communication platforms and should be interpreted broadly to reflect changes in technology and communication methods.

2. Scope of the Policy

- 2.1. This Policy applies to all elected and co-opted Members of West Surrey Shadow Authority whenever they use social media in connection with, or in circumstances that could reasonably be perceived as relating, to their role as a Councillor.
- 2.2. The Members' Code of Conduct applies whenever a Member is acting, claims to be acting, or could reasonably be regarded as acting in their official capacity. Examples include where a Member identifies themselves as a Shadow Councillor, comments on Shadow Authority business, engages with residents or officers on Shadow Authority matters, or uses Shadow Authority resources or Shadow Authority-managed social media accounts.

- 2.3. Members should recognise that the distinction between personal and official use of social media is not always clear. Even where an account is described as personal, it may still be associated with a Member's public role. Statements such as "views are my own" may help to clarify that a post expresses a personal opinion, but they do not remove a Member's responsibilities under the Members' Code of Conduct where that Code applies.

3. Using Social Media Responsibly

- 3.1. Having established when this Policy applies, the following sections set out the standards expected of Members when using social media and the principles that should guide their online conduct.
- 3.2. Members are expected to use social media in a manner that reflects the Seven Principles of Public Life and maintains public confidence in local government. The standards expected of Members in Shadow Authority meetings, correspondence and public events apply equally to online communication.
- 3.3. Social media provides an important forum for political discussion and democratic debate. Members are entitled to express political opinions, challenge policies and decisions, and engage in robust debate. However, criticism should be directed towards issues and decisions rather than individuals and should never amount to bullying, harassment, intimidation or personal abuse.
- 3.4. Members should communicate courteously and respectfully at all times. They should take reasonable care to ensure that information they publish is accurate, avoid disclosing confidential or personal information and be mindful that comments made online may be copied, shared or remain publicly available even after they have been deleted.
- 3.5. Particular care should be taken when commenting on matters where the Shadow Authority exercises a quasi-judicial function, such as planning or licensing. Members should avoid making comments that could give rise to a perception that they have predetermined an issue before all relevant information has been considered.

4. Before You Post

- 4.1. Before publishing content on social media, Members should consider whether the information is accurate, fair and respectful, whether it could disclose confidential or personal information, and whether it reflects the standards expected of someone holding public office. Members should also consider how a post might be interpreted by residents, colleagues and the wider public,

recognising that online content can be copied, shared and remain publicly available long after it has been deleted.

- 4.2. Members should exercise particular care before commenting on matters where the Shadow Authority is required to act impartially, including planning, licensing and other quasi-judicial functions. Comments that suggest a Member has reached a firm view before all relevant information has been considered may give rise to concerns about bias or predetermination.
- 4.3. Where there is any doubt about whether material is appropriate for publication, Members are encouraged to seek advice from the Monitoring Officer or Democratic Services before posting.

5. Engaging with Others

- 5.1. Social media provides an opportunity to engage openly and constructively with residents, businesses, community organisations and other stakeholders. Members should seek to encourage respectful discussion and recognise that positive engagement can help build trust and strengthen relationships with the communities they represent.
- 5.2. Members are entitled to disagree with others and to participate in robust political debate. However, discussions should remain courteous and proportionate. Members should avoid becoming involved in prolonged or hostile exchanges and should not respond in a manner that could reasonably be regarded as bullying, harassment, intimidation or personal abuse.
- 5.3. Members may use the moderation tools available on social media platforms where appropriate, including limiting replies, hiding comments or blocking users where behaviour is abusive, threatening, discriminatory or otherwise unacceptable. Such action should not be taken solely because an individual expresses criticism of the Shadow Authority or holds a different political opinion.
- 5.4. Where Members receive threatening or abusive communications, they should retain evidence where possible and report the matter to the relevant social media platform. Where appropriate, incidents should also be reported to the Monitoring Officer and, where necessary, the police.

6. Legal Responsibilities

- 6.1. Members remain personally responsible for complying with the law when using social media. The same legal obligations that apply to other forms of communication also apply online.
- 6.2. Members should take particular care to comply with legislation relating to data protection, confidentiality, defamation, copyright, equality, harassment and human rights. Confidential or exempt information must not be disclosed unless authorised by law or by the Shadow Authority.
- 6.3. Members should also exercise caution when commenting on criminal investigations, legal proceedings or matters before the courts, as online comments may prejudice proceedings or breach reporting restrictions.
- 6.4. During any pre-election period, Members should have regard to any guidance issued by the Monitoring Officer concerning publicity and the appropriate use of Shadow Authority resources and official social media accounts.

7. Artificial Intelligence, Emerging Technology and Cyber Security

- 7.1. Digital technology continues to evolve rapidly and Members may choose to use artificial intelligence or other emerging technologies when preparing material for publication. Members remain personally responsible for any content published in their name and should ensure that it is accurate, lawful and reflects their own views before publication.
- 7.2. Alongside the opportunities presented by emerging technologies, Members should also take reasonable steps to protect their online accounts and digital information unauthorised access. Good practice includes:
 - using strong passwords;
 - enabling multi-factor authentication where available;
 - keeping software and devices up to date; and
 - remaining alert to phishing attempts and online scams.
- 7.3. Where an account used in connection with Shadow Authority business is compromised, Members should notify the Monitoring Officer promptly so that appropriate advice and support can be provided.

8. Advice and Support

- 8.1. The Shadow Authority is committed to supporting Members in using social media effectively, responsibly and safely. Advice on the application of this Policy, the Members' Code of Conduct and related governance issues is available from the Monitoring Officer.

- 8.2. Members are encouraged to seek advice before publishing material where they are uncertain about its accuracy, legality or potential implications. Obtaining advice at an early stage can help avoid misunderstandings, protect both the Member and the Shadow Authority, and promote public confidence in local government.
- 8.3. The Shadow Authority may provide training and guidance from time to time to support Members in developing good practice and responding to changes in legislation, technology and social media platforms.

9. Complaints and Breaches

- 9.1. Concerns about a Member's use of social media will be considered in accordance with the Shadow Authority's standards arrangements where the Members' Code of Conduct applies. Whether the Code applies will depend on the circumstances of each case, including whether the Member was acting, claiming to act, or could reasonably have been perceived to be acting in their official capacity.
- 9.2. Members should recognise that deleting or editing online content does not necessarily remove it from the public domain. Where concerns arise, it may be appropriate to retain screenshots or other evidence to assist in establishing the facts.
- 9.3. A failure to follow this Policy will not automatically amount to a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct. However, the Policy may be taken into account when considering whether a Member has complied with the standards expected of elected representatives.

10. Review of the Policy

- 10.1. This Policy will be reviewed periodically by the Monitoring Officer to ensure that it remains consistent with legislation, national guidance and recognised good practice. The Monitoring Officer may issue supplementary guidance from time to time to assist Members in the practical application of this Policy, which should be read alongside this Policy and the Members' Code of Conduct.

Appendix A – A Quick Sense Check Before Posting

This appendix provides practical reminders to support the principles set out in this Policy. It does not form part of the Policy itself. Before publishing content, Members may find it helpful to pause and ask themselves the following questions:

- Is the information accurate and up to date?
- Would I be comfortable if this post appeared in the local media or was discussed at a Shadow Authority meeting?
- Could the post disclose confidential or personal information?
- Could my comments give the impression that I have already made up my mind on a matter that I may later have to determine?
- Am I communicating respectfully, even where I disagree with others?
- Have I checked that any photographs, videos or other content can be shared lawfully?
- If I have used artificial intelligence to draft or edit content, have I checked it carefully for accuracy and suitability?
- Is my account protected by appropriate security measures, including multi-factor authentication where available?
- If I am unsure, have I sought advice before posting?