SHDC MONITORING OFFICER GUIDANCE

TO COUNCILLORS

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Brixton Parish Council Use of Social Media

SHDC Monitoring Officer Guidance to Councillors

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Used appropriately, social media can be a good way of engaging with your residents and of getting feedback from them on issues affecting your community. However, it also has significant risks and if used inappropriately, can result in damaging your reputation and that of your council, breaching the code of conduct as well as leaving you at risk of court proceedings. The following guidance is to help ensure you stay on the right side.

1. **Stop, think and read before you post.**
   People can be provocative and argumentative. It is difficult not to engage when you are the subject of rumours, misinformation and smear campaigns. Words you say in response cannot be unspoken and even if you delete a hastily fired off blog, post or tweet; people will have read it already. At which point matters are likely to spiral out-of-control quickly. Reflect and take time to think whether you need to post. You do not have to respond to everything at any speed, or at all. Ignore if necessary. If you decide to post, be respectful, keep your dignity and do not say anything that you would not say or share in a public meeting. Read what you have written especially tweets, before posting. Other people may not read your post in the way that you intend; not everyone shares your sense of humour!

2. **You are always on duty.**
   The fact that you hold public office means that people see your blog, posts or tweets, even if described as being from a personal social media account, as representing the views of your position and party. Anything posted on social media becomes Council business. Including 'Views are my own', 'Personal views', 'Retweets don't indicate an indorsement' or something similar will not make people less likely to think this. Whatever you say reflects on the Council's reputation.

3. **Stay in control of your social media accounts and posts**.
   Once you post something on social media, it is difficult to retain control over how others will use it or react to it. Other people can manipulate your post without your consent, take it out of context and reference or duplicate your post in places on the web beyond your reach. Think carefully about who has editing rights on your social media account. It is safer to manage your own accounts. You can then decide who can view your media account; what is posted to it; and you can moderate comments and messages against your own judgment of what is offensive or disrespectful.

4. **Consider who really are your friends.**
   While the terms 'following' or 'friending' just mean you have linked your account to someone else so you can share information, some people may imply an intimacy that is not there. Think carefully about who you request to be 'friends' with or accept 'friend' requests from. Other people may see you requesting or accepting for example, an officer of the Councils as a 'friend' on a V20 social network site as compromising the professional and impartial relationship between officers and councillors.

5. **Be sure of the facts.**
   You are in a position of authority so people will believe what you say. You are personally responsible for what you publish on social media. So be careful about what you post and what you retweet and share.

6. **Mistakes happen.**
   If you do make a mistake, it is better to admit this rather than trying to cover it up. Acknowledge your mistake and delete the offending post or text.

7. **The legal bits.**
   You have the same personal responsibilities and legal duties online as anyone else and more besides. Before you post, tweet, or blog consider:

   7.1. Defamation. If you publish an untrue statement about a person that is damaging to their reputation, they may take legal action against you for an injunction and damages. This will also apply if you allow someone else to publish something defamatory on your website if you know about it and do not remove it promptly.

   7.2. Bullying and discriminatory comments. Behaving in a discriminatory, bullying or harassing way towards any individual including making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality), disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief via social media by posting images, links or comments could, in certain circumstances, result in you committing a criminal offence.

   7.3. Obscene material. Nothing should be published that could be considered obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

   7.4. Data protection. You must not publish or post an individual's personal data unless you have their express written permission. If you include photographs or other images, you will need to consider whether anyone shown in these may reasonably object - consider your obligations under data protection law.

   7.5. Copyright. Putting images or text on a site/profile from a copyrighted source without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing anything you are unsure about, or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in you paying damages.

   7.6. Code of conduct. When accepting office as a councillor, you agreed to comply with the standards of behaviour set out in your Council's Code of Conduct. Failure to comply with the Code of Conduct can result in a standards complaint against you.

   7.7. Bias and pre-determination. If you are involved in determining planning or licensing applications, avoid publishing anything that might suggest that you do not have an open mind about a matter you may be involved in determining. If not the decision runs the risk of being invalidated.