

Standards Committee – 16th January, 2012

Report of the Monitoring Officer

Standards for England - Guide to Blogging

Purpose of Report

1. To draw the attention of the Committee to revised guidance from Standards for England concerning 'blogging' and the use of other Internet sites.

Background

2. Standards for England recently issued advice regarding a case (MC v Standards Committee of LB Richmond), in which the judge made comments about the meaning of the phrase "acting as a representative of your authority" in paragraph 2(1)(b) of the Members Code of Conduct. In this case, the judge made comments that official capacity should make reference to the conduct of the member that amounts to acting, etc, as a representative of the authority.
3. Standards for England noted that this case could have implications for the interpretation of a Member's activity on blogs, facebook, twitter and other similar internet sites. As such, Standards for England issued a revised 'quick guide to blogging' document, which is available on their website at:
<http://www.standardsforengland.gov.uk/Guidance/TheCodeofConduct/CodeGuidance/Onlineguides/Quickcodeguides/BloggingQuickGuide/>
4. The changes made to the guide are relatively minor and take the form of a series of practical considerations, which should be noted by all Members. The document, extracted from the Standards for England website, is attached as an Appendix.

Finance

5. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Law

6. The Members Code of Conduct is adopted by the Council pursuant to the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008. The additional guidance issued by Standards for England is intended to complement the statutory provisions taking account of practical experience and the findings in individual cases.

Equality Impact

7. The guidance is consistent with the Council's policies on equality and diversity. It is a significant requirement of the existing Code that Members do not discriminate against people on the grounds of race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and age.

Recommendation

8. That the report be noted and the updated guidance be drawn to the attention of all Members via the Members Portal Intranet site.



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List of Background Papers

Guidance issued by Standards for England

Standards for England

Quick Guide to Blogging

Blogging and social networking are effective methods for councillors to interact with constituents and support local democracy. Used effectively, they can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors and politics.

Standards for England support the use of such media and encourage councillors to get online. You should think about what you say and how you say it, in just the same way as you would when making statements in person or in writing.

You will also need to think about whether you are acting as a councillor, or giving the impression that you are representing your authority. To make sure you comply with the Code of Conduct (the Code) and to ensure your use of online media is well received we suggest the following general hints.

Do

- set appropriate privacy settings for your blog or networking site – especially if you have a private, non-political blog
- keep an eye out for defamatory or obscene posts from others on your blog or page and remove them as soon as possible to avoid the perception that you condone such views
- be aware that the higher your profile as a councillor, the more likely it is you will be seen as acting in your official capacity when you blog or network
- ensure you use council facilities appropriately; if you use a council provided blog site or social networking area, any posts you make are likely to be viewed as made in your official capacity
- be aware that by publishing information that you could not have accessed without your position as a councillor you are likely to be seen as acting in your official capacity
- make political points, but be careful about being too specific or personal if referring to individuals. An attack on individuals may be seen as disrespectful, whereas general comments about another party or genuine political expression is less likely to be viewed as disrespect.

Don't

- blog in haste.
- post comments that you would not be prepared to make in writing or face to face
- use council facilities for personal or political blogs.

When the Code may apply

Bear in mind the Code when you blog or use social networking sites. You should pay particular attention to the following paragraphs of the Code:

- Disrespect
- Bullying
- Disclosure of confidential information
- Disrepute
- Misuse of authority resources

However, it is difficult to give definitive advice on the application of the Code as each blog and social networking page is different. The content of a blog or other social networking tool and the circumstances surrounding its creation will determine whether or not it might be covered by the Code.

Ethical use of online social media is not limited to what is covered in the Code. We encourage members to respect the [**Ten General Principles of Public Life**](#). While your conduct may not be a breach of the Code it may still be viewed as less than exemplary and attract adverse publicity for your office and authority.