

**SOLIHULL GOVERNOR SERVICES**

**GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNORS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING**



**Social Networking: Principles for Governors**

**Introduction**

The way people communicate is starting to change, with use of the internet increasing throughout society. Easy to use tools such as social networking sites like Facebook make it a simple task to have conversations online and for people to share information, experiences and knowledge. Of course, most of us are very used to emailing, which continues to be a common form of communication for governors. These present an incredible opportunity for school governors to communicate and collaborate more effectively – however it is one that comes with risks and governors must be aware of the implications of participating online in their official capacity. This document sets out the considerations governors should bear in mind when using the web, to ensure risks are mitigated and opportunities achieved.

**The opportunity**

Participating online offers a number of opportunities for school governors. For example:

* **Communicating between governors:** using trusted online spaces, governors can have discussion online and share information with one another between face to face meetings, increasing efficiency. Governors can also communicate with other governors in their local authority and nationally.
* **Listening to what people are saying**: like it or not, people will be talking about your school online, and they may be being critical. Unless you are active digitally yourself, you won’t know what people are saying, nor will you be able to respond
* **Engaging with parents and students:** greater involvement from school stakeholders such as parents and students can be achieved by talking to them online, especially when using spaces they already visit regularly, such as Facebook
* **Promoting the work of the governors:** by using digital channels to talk about the work governors are doing, more people will get to hear about and understand it
* **Encouraging new people to become governors:** the visibility provided by participating online means that more people will be aware of the role and inspire them to get involved themselves

**The risks**

As well as an incredible opportunity, digital participation is not without risk. Some of the risks include:

* **A governor publishes something regrettable:** the ease of publishing online means it is easy to write something that brings the school into disrepute. The governor might be writing in his/her capacity as a governor or as an individual. Even as an individual, his/her actions could be criticized as bringing a school into disrepute, especially if other users know of his/her governor status. Sometimes people write comments which they would never dare say to another person’s face. Also problems have often arisen from trails of emails being copied/forwarded inappropriately, containing sensitive information, or written in an unprofessional manner
* **Confidential information is released to the public:** again, the fact that it is so easy to put information on the web means data security policy can be easily breached
* **An online discussion between some but not all members of a governing body undermines collective knowledge and responsibility:** there is a danger of a two-tier governing body resulting from online discussions that exclude those governors not online or engaged

None of these risks are a reason for governors not to be active online. However, they are risks that need to be managed, and this guidance forms a key part of that mitigation.

**Guiding principles**

The guiding principles for online participation really are no different to communicating in any other medium. The seven principles of public life are a very good starting point:

1. **Selflessness:** holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.
2. **Integrity:** holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.
3. **Objectivity:** in carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.
4. **Accountability:** holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.
5. **Openness:** holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands this.
6. **Honesty:** holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.
7. **Leadership:** holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

To add some specific digital context, the following guidelines on online participation are very useful.

* Disclose your position as a representative of your school unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a potential threat to personal security. Of course, individual governors may not intentionally communicate as an "accredited" representative but must always be aware that what they say and write as an individual could reflect negatively on them as a governor, their fellow governors or their school. Never give out personal details like home address and phone numbers.
* Always remember that participation online results in your comments being permanently available and open to being republished in other media. Stay within the legal framework and be aware that libel, defamation, copyright and data protection laws apply. This means that you should not disclose information, make commitments or engage in activities on behalf of the school unless you are authorised to do so. This authority may already be delegated or may be explicitly granted depending on your organisation.
* Also be aware that this may attract media interest in you as an individual, so proceed with care whether you are participating in an official or a personal capacity. If you have any doubts, take advice from a colleague.

