

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COUNCILLORS

CAPALC has organised two very useful training sessions (via Zoom) for September:

- Thursday 23 Sept 7-9.30pm - Code of Conduct Training
- Thursday 30 September 7pm - 9:30pm - Social Media for Councillors.

Recommendations

- All Councillors (plus one staff member) sign up for Code of Conduct
- Identify and sign up Councillors who use social media for training on the
- Note the Clerk's advice that the figure for Councillor training is increased in next year's budget bearing in mind that there will be Council elections in May 2022.

Reasons

- A new [model Code of Conduct](#) for Councillors was published in May by the Local Government Association, and [supplementary guidance](#) earlier this month. A training session will ensure all Councillors clearly understand what it is all about and what obligations it involves before a formal proposal to adopt an updated Code is then brought to the Council.
- Re social media, there are a lot of grey areas on usage and this course will bring much needed clarity and enable those who use social media to feel confident that they are following good practice.

Code of Conduct

The [current Councillor Code of Conduct adopted by the Council](#) back in 2013 was based on the then LGA recommended code for Members. I would strongly encourage to Councillors is to take advantage of the training on offer about the new Code to be clear of both the general principles of conduct expected of all Councillors and their specific obligations in relation to standards of conduct. The LGA states that the purpose of the Code of Conduct is to assist Councillors, in modelling the behaviour that is expected of them, to provide a personal check and balance, and to set out the type of conduct that could lead to action being taken against them. It is also to protect Councillors, the public, fellow Councillors, local authority officers and the reputation of local government.

The training event will explore the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct and examine the requirements of the local Code of Conduct, using real case scenarios for members to discuss. Areas which will be explored will include the use of social media, disclosure of confidential information and member-officer relations. We encourage as much discussion as possible around the cases so that members can see the issues from different perspectives and understand for themselves how cases have been resolved, whether formally or informally, including the role of party discipline. There will also be an in-depth discussion on the requirements on members to register and declare interests, again with case scenarios to discuss.

Social Media Use

Currently there is social media guidance in place for WPC (attached) because it did not prove possible to get agreement on a policy. A lot of Councils are encountering difficulties because of the sensitivities involved and perceived 'grey areas'.

Over recent months I am concerned at the degree of public comment on Waterbeach Babble that goes beyond comments on Council matters and strays into unfair comments on individuals. While Babble is a great community resource the tone of some postings is often negative and pointed – which is having a damaging effect on staff morale. Clearly this is not a WPC page so we have no control over what is allowed. Councillors however need to take care over how they interact with it. For those Councillors who do use it and are minded to post, please bear in mind the social media guidance and consider carefully what you want to say and the impact your words will have. If you are responding to an attack on the Council then can you ask people to contact the Parish Office directly to raise their concern as we can't deal with these through the medium of a Facebook page. I have put a statement onto the WPC webpage and Facebook pages to this effect – and similar to the one we put out a year ago after the last spat.

The training event will cover the use of social media by Members, looking at the opportunities and risks associated with it. We will look at some real-life examples where members have got themselves into difficulties, particularly with regard to Twitter and Facebook. It will look at how social media can be used effectively as a tool to promote the work of Members and inform the public but explore the dangers associated with its misuse. In particular we will explore the balance between political 'rough and tumble', freedom of expression and offensive/disrespectful language, looking at the boundaries between private life and 'official capacity';

As well as members' own posts, it will discuss issues around commenting on/liking/re-tweeting other people's (the public's) posts; how to use social media as a local campaigning tool but where the boundaries lie between advocating for a contentious issue/supporting /defending the council and defaming/damaging its reputation and running the risk of predetermination; and help people understand the use of privacy settings. There will be a series of real-case scenarios to discuss and consider what is appropriate and what action could be taken should similar issues arise locally. The session will involve a short presentation, then a series of scenarios for discussion. The session will be as participative as possible. At the end of the course Members will:-

- Understand the importance of having a Social Media Protocol and how social media is dealt with by the Code of Conduct
- Understand other legal risks
- Be aware of how to use it effectively and how its misuse can have an impact on public trust

Course leaders: Both sessions to be run by external presenters Paul Hoey and Natalie Ainscough of Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd, a company set up in 2012 to support local authorities in managing their arrangements for handling councillor conduct issues. Paul was director of strategy at Standards for England from 2001 until its closure in 2012, and Natalie Ainscough worked as his deputy.

They have worked with over 400 authorities in one form or another through provision of training, investigative support and wider governance advice and are the national experts on standards arrangements and advised the Committee on Standards in Public Life during their 2018/19 review of the statutory framework. They were also commissioned by the Local Government Association to draw up a new model Code of Conduct and supporting guidance.

Cost/Budget There is a cost per member of £40 for the Code of Conduct. However we hold training credits of £760 with the organisers (CAPALC). If all Councillors attend Code of Conduct training there would still be a credit of £160 remaining.

The social media training is £45 per member. I expect not everyone is (or wishes to be) active on social media so there is a case for targetting this at those who will benefit the most from it.

There is a figure of £450 in the budget for Councillor training this year. You'll recall a [proposal for training in planning issues](#) was brought to the April meeting but no decisions were taken. I appreciate Councillors may not want another training event when two are already proposed, but I do feel this training would be of benefit to the PC.

S Mason
Clerk
July 2021