

The Improvement Service

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE No. 3

Blogging



What is the issue?

THE internet is everywhere in the 21st century. Whether it is in the home, office, classroom or library, the majority of the electorate now go online every day. In 2009, 62 % of Scottish households had internet access.

For Elected Members, this brings an increased opportunity to engage through social media, which is the collective term for online communication tools like blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The most established and popular social media tool for Elected Members is the blog. This name derives from the term 'web log' and is best described as a frequently updated online journal intended for public consumption.

For many Elected Members, blogs have completely changed the way they connect and engage with their constituents - for the better.

Traditional communications methods remain vital, but councillors no longer have to rely solely on meeting people face to face to discuss issues, solve problems and get points across. They don't have to rely on local newspapers to air their views.

Elected Members can put their own thoughts in writing and take it to the wider electorate through a personal blog. From there, the electorate can interact and councillors receive instant feedback on various issues. In many cases, this leads to a quicker resolution of problems.

"I've been a councillor for nine years and have always produced a regular newsletter, but there is a limit to how many times you can push a piece of paper through a letterbox. I felt a blog was an ideal way to regularly stay in touch with my constituents and judging by the feedback and amount of visitors, it's extremely well read and has been worthwhile."

Fraser Macpherson, Lib-Dem Councillor for Dundee's West End, has had almost 200,000 'hits' on his blog since 2006.



Why do blogs matter?

As stated earlier, the world now revolves around the internet. Everyday life is dominated by the world-wide web and as time moves on, this reliance on the internet will only increase.

The internet is all-consuming. From buying clothes and music to booking holidays, we do it online. From chatting with friends and family through social media to watching television and films, we do it online.

When someone is looking for information on any topic, their first port of call is now the internet. It shapes the way people live their lives and is altering the nature of democracy in Scotland.

Each day, people spend more and more time online. It's only natural therefore that many will look to the internet to find out more about the people who represent them in local government.

As this happens, the opportunities for Elected Members to get make their voice heard and engage more powerfully with their constituents in modern ways have never been greater.

By using blogs, councillors can take good news to the people. They can publicise events, keep residents informed, make solid connections and solve urgent problems more effectively.

“People react to my blog posts, get in touch and I take cases forward. I try to talk about what I do, where I go and give all the different local organisations as much credit as possible. I often get good feedback from teachers when I write about their schools.”

SNP Councillor Alison Thewliss started her blog in 2007 when she began her campaign to gain election in Glasgow's Calton area.



What is the challenge for Elected Members?

THE basic challenge for Elected Members is to move with the times, embrace the social media revolution, harness its power and use blogs to benefit the lives of the electorate.

As the popularity of blogs grows at a rapid rate, local government cannot afford to get left behind. Elected Members have to use blogs wisely and in a way that leads to positive engagement

You can learn from political social media success stories like that of US President, Barack Obama, who tapped into the enormous power of social media to aid his victorious election campaign in 2008.

Elected Members with a real web presence have a clear advantage over those who do not, because they are widening their appeal, reach and profile. Yet, it should not be viewed as a substitute for traditional methods of interaction - just a modern addition.

“These days, people find out about you by typing your name into Google. If you don’t have a web presence, you don’t exist to some people - young and old. If councillors and politicians at different levels don’t engage with these social media formats, they will have a distinct disadvantage.”

Labour Councillor Andrew Burns writes a thriving blog, which he first set up back in 2004.



What does ‘good practice’ look like?

There is no such thing as a perfect blog. By their very nature, blogs come in different shapes and sizes. What works for one person, won't work for another, so there is no definitive answer to this question.

In short, a good blog is one that attracts regular readers, informs people and achieves its purpose - to make the community a better place.

Lively, regular content and vibrant interaction is the key to a good blog. The most stylish, technologically-advanced blog might be pleasing on the eye, but if the content is sporadic and weak, then the aesthetics are pointless.

Endeavour to be honest with your readers. Endeavour to inform and entertain. Endeavour to give them a platform on which to interact and raise pertinent points regarding your community.

If you strive to achieve all of the above, you will see the results. Constituents will engage with you differently and you will be able to reach further into your ward - leading to better outcomes.



Key questions to consider

How do I start a blog?

Starting a blog is quick and straightforward. You can use any one of a number of popular websites that offer free blog templates, like [blogger.com](https://www.blogger.com) or [wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com).

These sites can get you up and running within 10 minutes and offer a simple, step-by-step process to creating the blog. They also allow you to post text, video and photographs, and have a facility for readers to post comments.

Before you begin, speak to fellow councillors about which host site they used to create their own blog and take advice from various sources. There might be a specific style of blog that will suit your own needs.

What should I write about?

The beauty of having a blog is that it's your own, personal web journal, so the style and content being posted is entirely up to you.

Most Elected Members share views on various subjects affecting their own ward, provide information on topical issues concerning the council and also use their blog to campaign and canvas opinion.

The blog could give a local slant on national issues and is a useful tool for highlighting all the positive work in your area. Even the smallest event can make for a great blog posting and generate good feedback.

Many councillors also use the blog to give constituents a better appreciation of their personality. A lot of Elected Members blog about their own interests, which gives their blog a personal touch.



Are there any tips for producing a successful blog?

Most councillors who run successful blogs give the same advice - blog regularly and vary the content of the posts.

If readers know the site will be updated several times per week, they will be more likely to come back. Likewise, if the text is augmented by photographs and video footage, it makes the site more attractive.

Also think before you write and don't post anything you wouldn't say at a public meeting. This is crucial. While a blog can seem like your own, cocooned space away from prying eyes, the exact opposite is true.

Word spreads fast on the internet and what you post will be stored forever, so don't post a rant you will regret. Use good sense at all times.

Remember to take legal issues into consideration. Blogs are not immune from laws surrounding the areas of libel, copyright and data protection. (*Section 5 of the 'Connected Councillors' Guide also offers guidance on this*)

How will my constituents find out about my blog and will they be able to interact?

With regards to the design of the blog, it has to be instantly recognisable. Constituents should be able to identify that this is your blog, so your name, ward, position and party should be prominent.

Tell people about your blog and include the address on newsletters, emails and business cards. A photograph will also help, while some councils provide a link to personal blogs on their website. However, blogs are classed as personal sites and are not maintained by councils.

Some bloggers use an alternative title but your contact details - name, email and phone number - should always be visible and easily accessible.

The whole purpose of the blog is to ensure that the electorate engage and communicate. People will visit the blog looking for a solution to a specific issue, so make it easy for them to interact with you.

This could involve leaving comments at the bottom of your own posts but be careful. If offensive comments are allowed to be posted, this can compromise your own position, so consider moderating comments before allowing them online. You can also request readers become members before commenting.



Any other blogging advice?

Don't view a blog solely as a platform to air your own opinion. Listen to your electorate and use the blog to join in the real conversations that people are already having.

Maximise the exposure of your blog, by incorporating an RSS feed into your site (RSS (Really Simple Syndication) lets you subscribe to content updates from websites, and receive them in one place without having to visit the sites. It also means that your subscribers will be automatically notified when you update your blog). You can also link your blog to Facebook and Twitter. Take the news to the people, don't wait for them to find you.

Promote the blog and social media at every opportunity. Lobby council IT departments and ensure councillors and officials have unblocked access to your blog. Encourage your council to support the uptake of social media.

Register with the Improvement Service's Communities of Practice website and use the blog function to take your postings to an audience of over 60,000 people in the fastest growing local government social media site across Scotland and the UK.

Key messages

- Fully explore the prospect of creating a blog, learn from colleagues and enter the world of social media with an open mind in order to make the most of the opportunities it presents.
- Use your blog to interact with your electorate, generate feedback, learn more about issues within your community and achieve better outcomes.
- Vary the content of blog posts, promote the site during your day-to-day duties and ensure your blog can be easily identified and found through a routine internet search.
- Don't use your blog as a substitute for traditional methods of communication. It should be viewed as an additional engagement tool - not as a replacement.
- Demonstrate good sense at all times and think before you post. Be careful when allowing unrestricted comments and ensure you are fully briefed on copyright/libel laws.



Further support and contacts

Scottish Elected Member blogs

(Individual case studies are also available)

Andrew Burns - City of Edinburgh Labour Group Leader and Councillor for Fountainbridge and Craiglockhart: <http://andrewburns.blogspot.com/>

Cameron Rose - Conservative Councillor for Southside/Newington, Edinburgh: <http://cameronrose.blogspot.com/>

Alison Thewliss - SNP Councillor for Calton, Glasgow: <http://bellgrovebelle.blogspot.com/>

Fraser Macpherson - Lib-Dem Councillor for Dundee West End: <http://www.dundeewestend.com/>

Maggie Chapman - Green Councillor for Leith Walk: <http://maggiechapman.wordpress.com/>

Feature articles on blogging

Mashable (Global internet news blog) - Feature on social media in Local Politics: <http://mashable.com/2009/10/19/social-media-local-politics/>

Scotblog Awards 2010 - Top-voted politician blogs: <http://scottishroundup.co.uk/2010/01/28/top-politicians-blogs/>

IDeA - Social Media for 21st century councillors: <http://socialmedia.21st.cc/>

Blogging guides/sites

IDeA - Connected Councillors' social media guide: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=17797214>

IDeA - Brief tips on Blogging and Facebook use: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=16193169>

Mashable - Blogging guide and news: <http://mashable.com/tag/blogging/>



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