

Social Media House Rules (Communications, Peter Le Riche)

Synopsis of report:

The number of followers of the Council's social media channels have grown considerably during the past year. A set of house rules is required to bring a level of control to how the Council deals with unacceptable comments and behaviour by members of the public. This also sets out the standards which the public can expect of the Council's Communications Team when engaging with them via the corporate profiles.

Recommendation(s):

(i)The committee approves the adoption of a set of house rules (appendix A), including that the Council values freedom of speech, and supports the reasons why in a very small number of cases comments may be deleted and users blocked.

(ii)The committee delegate authority to the Head of Public Relations and Marketing and staff he may delegate to authority to make decisions on the application of the house rules on a day-to-day basis as required.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 Members of the public who have social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and Nextdoor (the platforms) are able to comment on the Council's posts on its social media accounts. The Council's accounts are open to all to view and therefore people do not have to 'follow' or be approved the Communications Team, which is responsible for the Council's social media activity.
- 1.2 Comments are usually posted underneath a post published by the Council and the public can write anything they wish to, which can then be read by anyone else viewing the post.
- 1.3 The number of followers on all four core platforms has grown considerably during the past year thanks to a concerted effort by the Communications Team. Therefore, it is now appropriate to publish a set of house rules. These rules make clear how the Council's Communications staff will behave when posting (polite, factual etc) and the team's expectations of the public (polite, staying on topic etc).
- 1.4 The existence of house rules is common in the sphere of social media platform management. They provide a framework for managing online behaviour and language including comments which may be offensive or libellous. Posts and people who do not meet the rules can then be managed or blocked in accordance with approved rules rather than purely on the basis of a staff member's opinion.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Primarily house rules exist to encourage sensible and fair behaviour among the public and in their comments. They also set out how the Communications Team would deal with serious or repeated breaches.

- 2.2 The rules exist to make the Council's social media profiles a place where anyone can give their view without being ridiculed or abused. It is also important that posts published by the Council can add value to local life through explaining its work and decisions without being enveloped in unnecessary argument, rhetoric or other forms of negative social media tactics.
- 2.3 The Council values freedom of speech and the house rules are therefore 'light touch', allowing people to comment in almost any way they wish. As a public body the Council accepts criticism and the fact that the public are entitled to give their view on its services and decisions. On that basis negative or critical comments relevant to the post and made sensibly would never be removed. However, the Communications Team also believes that while some people use social media to complain, most generally follow the Council's accounts to find out what the authority is doing, rather than to hear other people's views. The ease of access for these people should be the priority.
- 2.4 There is no rule under which the Council would delete negative comments per se, as long as those comments are related to the post they appear next to, are expressed sensibly, are proportionate (ie not repeated many times) and use non-offensive language. For several years now, the Communications Team has taken a very relaxed approach in this area, with wide-ranging debate allowed to take place. It is expected this will continue.
- 2.5 The rules will be employed as a last resort, where there are repeated or significant breaches.
- 2.6 The options open to the Communications Team to deal with breaches of the house rules are to delete posts or in very rare cases, to block users. Blocking means that an individual user will no longer be able to comment on posts by the Council on that specific platform. However on some platforms it is still possible for a person to view the Council's posts without being logged in to the platform. For blocked users who cannot see the Council's posts, other social media platforms remain available, and the Council's website, news stories, newsletters and other forms of communication continue to be open to them.
- 2.7 There is no right of appeal against deleted posts (it is possible that a similar version of the post which does not breach the rules could be reposted).
- 2.8 Where a user is blocked, that user may appeal to the Corporate Head of Law and Governance, who will review the decision with the Head of Public Relations and Marketing.
- 2.9 The Communications Team has carried out research among other councils to create rules which are broadly in common with wider local government social media use.

Among councils reviewed are:

[Elmbridge Borough Council](#)
[Surrey County Council](#)
[Birmingham City Council](#)
[Wokingham Borough Council](#)
[Glasgow City Council](#)

3. **Policy framework implications**

- 3.1 The creation of house rules form part of the Communications Team's service area plan commitment to create a social media strategy and policy.

4. **Legal implications**

- 4.1 As indicated in the body of the report the use of social media is something which can promote the exchange of information and ideas. Whilst undertaken electronically, so to speak, it is still a printed medium. Inappropriate comments could still result in legal proceedings. The use of house rules will enable the Council to promote the use of social media whilst ensuring it does not cause offence or cross the boundary between what is lawful and what is unlawful.

5. **Timetable for Implementation**

- 5.1 If the committee approves the house rules, they will be published on the Council's website, and shared across all social media channels during the two weeks after the committee meeting. They will be implemented at the end of that two-week period.

(To Resolve)

Background Papers

None stated