

Report title	Social Media Policy
Report author	Peter Le Riche, Head of Public Relations and Marketing
Department	Chief Executive's Office
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

The Council has been active on social media for several years. In the last two years use of this channel of communication has grown, both in terms of audience numbers and relative importance in how the Council reaches local people.

In addition, Council staff now use more functionality of the various social networks and interact to a greater extent with the public. The time is now right to implement a policy which:

1. Brings a framework to the use of social media for staff members operating the Council's corporate accounts.
2. Set out how the Council acts, operates and manages its social media platforms.
3. Explains to the wider social media community how they may expect to be treated in specific circumstances.
4. Gives guidance for staff members' personal use of social media, insofar as it could affect the Council or result in disciplinary proceedings.

The policy falls into two parts:

1. Governance, management and usage arrangements.
2. Day to day publishing and community management.

Recommendation(s):

The Committee is recommended to approve the Social Media Policy and authorise the Head of Public Relations and Marketing, and his delegates to implement it on a day to day basis.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Council uses social media to communicate about its work, successes and the services it provides to the community. The main social media platforms in use are Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Nextdoor.
- 1.2 A small number of service areas also have sub-accounts in Instagram.

- 1.3 Until the last two years, social media had been used in a productive but basic way, primarily with text and pictures being posted, and engagement with residents taking place in a limited way.
- 1.4 More recently, through staff changes in the Communications Team, which is responsible for social media, the type of content, functions used and level of resident engagement have all increased substantially.
- 1.5 As a result, the time is right to introduce a policy bringing structure and a framework to how the Council and its staff operate on council-branded social media. This will provide clarity for employees and the public about the way in which commonly used functions or activities are carried out, and the restrictions within which the team works.
- 1.6 The policy also provides guidance for all employees about the personal use of social media insofar as it affects the Council.

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

- 2.1 Using social media to communicate with residents is now the most important way in which the Council can reach large audiences in an effective manner. It has become integral to the way in which information is shared, successes are highlighted and the authority's work is explained.
- 2.2 As a result the Council publishes information on its corporate social media channels daily, or multiple times per day.
- 2.3 The variety of content created and the range and type of interactions with the public have grown substantially over the past two years. On a regular basis the Communications Team now publishes, videos, slide shows, image galleries and graphics as well as individual photos. A wider range of information is also shared in text format.
- 2.4 Employees also respond to followers' comments on multiple topics and explain issues, correct inaccurate statements or provide further detail where appropriate.
- 2.5 Implementing a policy brings structure and sets out how the Communications Team will deal with some of the common situations which arise. It also explains the framework which the Communications Team works in, to demonstrate that social media operation is not a free for all and that restrictions do exist on the types of material which can be published.
- 2.6 It sets out why the Council uses social media, what it is used for, and the types of content which are acceptable and unacceptable.
- 2.7 The policy includes statements on restrictions on confidential information which may become known to the Communications Team and how any attempts by the public to send personal information by social media should be handled.
- 2.8 The policy confirms that the Communications Team 'owns' the Council's corporate social media presence, and how each platform is controlled.
- 2.9 The process for requests for new accounts from service areas is set out, as is the use of social media in partnerships, how complaints and statutory requests for information should be managed.

- 2.10 The use of the Council's logo as its identifier (the equivalent of a person's face) is set out, together with clarification that it would not be adapted or changed in any way to support individual causes or topics. This is because there is no set list of causes or topics which should or should not be supported by the Council, and within the community opposing views may exist on any which are put forward. The Council's role is to serve and be accessible to all members of the community.
- 2.11 The policy also provides information on day to day management, including setting out how content is quality controlled and approved, rules around sharing and responding to direct messages.
- 2.12 Guidance on when the Council would and would not respond to comments is included, as is detail on when comments would be removed, how individual users may be blocked in rare cases and how social media is used during the pre-election period.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 Appendix B within the policy sets out guidance for employees when using their own personal social media, insofar as it could affect the Council's reputation. It explains that as with other behaviour or activities, Council staff remain subject to a number of employment policies and that it is these policies which would be brought to bear if inappropriate behaviour is found to have taken place. This is with regards to the use of the Council's corporate and sub accounts and also by employees using their personal accounts.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The policy does not require any extra budget or extra staffing resource.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The Corporate Head of Law and Governance has been consulted and his comments incorporated into the policy.
- 5.2 Local authorities have to communicate with residents to inform them of their activities. Historically local authorities would use press releases as the method of communication. With the advent of modern technology the means of communication has greatly expanded. Social media is now a commonly used tool by most organisations.
- 5.3 Controls regarding local authority publicity are contained within the various pieces of legislation, namely the Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Government Act 1986. Under the provisions of section 4 Local Government Act 1986 the Secretary of State may issue one or more codes of recommended practice as regards the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity, and such other related matters as he thinks appropriate; and local authorities shall have regard to the provisions of any such code in coming to any decision on publicity.
- 5.4 In exercise of those powers the Secretary of State issued in March 2011 a Code setting out such guidance. When using social media the Council is subject to the same legal controls as apply to any user of social media regarding the material it publishes.

6. Other implications

6.1 The policy sets out how social media requests relating to the Freedom of Information Act would be managed.

6.2 The Interim Corporate Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development has been consulted and his comments incorporated into the policy.

7. Timetable for Implementation

7.1 Subject to approval, the Policy will be implemented 1 January 2024. It will be reviewed annually.

8. Risk implications

8.1 This policy alleviates the reputational risks associated with the Council's use of social media, by putting in place rules which the users of its corporate accounts must follow. It also sets out what acceptable and unacceptable use and content are and how commonly occurring situations should be handled to create consistency. In addition, the policy identifies that there is a level of risk associated with the Council's presence on social media platforms, in that they are free to use and available to a very wide range of people worldwide, with many different views. The risk of the Council's content being placed in proximity to content advocating negative behaviour, or the negative behaviour of the platforms themselves will be kept under review and action taken appropriately if required.

9. Appendices

- Appendix A – Social Media Policy document