

Social Media Protocol

April 2014

Policy, People & Communications

Social Media Protocol for Wealden District Council

1. General introduction to social media

1.1 Social media is increasingly popular form of communication for individuals and organisations and is used both socially and for business. Social media is used to describe any kind of on-line tool that you can use for sharing what you know, including blogs, photo sharing, video sharing, social networks, mobile phone applications, texting, digital TV services, gaming and collaboration tools. Unlike a telephone conversation or email, it is a broadcast medium - your messages are likely to be viewed by a wider range of people than just the intended recipient.

How is this?

1.2 *Twitter* messages will appear on the feed of all the account holder's *Followers*, and can be retweeted, or searched for by unconnected users when content contains a hashtag # prefix. *Twitter* accounts can be viewed by anyone, without the need for a *Twitter* account. *Facebook* posts can be read by anyone, and those with a personal *Facebook* page can then share them with their *Friends*. If the *Facebook* page is a corporate site, its posts will appear on the feeds of those who click the "Like" button on the page. The information on web blogs and other forms of sharing media can be accessed through internet search engines.

What you need to remember...

1.3 Social media is a cheap and effective way of reaching out to the community, sharing information and ideas. Its immediacy can be invaluable in times of service disruption.

1.4 It also means that all messages should be treated as public, and are open to responses from people with different views and agendas. Sometimes this can be positive, but it can also result in unwelcome criticism and abuse. And it is popular with journalists, so what you say on *Twitter* one day, may end up in newsprint the next day.

1.5 There is no delete. Even if you delete something from a social media site, it's likely that other people will have already seen it... in a news feed popping up on their desktop, or on their mobile phone. Someone may already have posted it elsewhere online, or shared it with their friends.

1.6 Using *Twitter* or *Facebook* is no different from talking loudly in a public place: you can expect other people to hear what you are saying, including some who like to gossip!

1.7 You must be willing to take personal responsibility for anything that you say online.

Social Media and the Law

1.8 The public nature of social media raises some general legal issues which ALL users should be aware of:

Libel – If you publish an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation, they may take a libel action against you. The same thing may happen if, for example, someone else publishes something libellous on your website, you know about it and don't take swift action to remove it. A successful libel claim could result in the award of damages against you,

Copyright – Using images or text from a copyrighted source (for example extracts from publications or photos), without obtaining permission, is likely to breach copyright laws. Therefore don't publish anything you are unsure about, or obtain prior permission. Again, a successful claim for breach of copyright would be likely to lead to an award of damages against you.

Data Protection – Do not publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their express permission.

Safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults - Staff who have direct or indirect contact with children, families and vulnerable adults in the course of their work have a responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable adults and children. You should bear this in mind in your social media activities. Promote online safety and make sure that your content is suitable. Never ask users to divulge any personal details, including their home address, email address, school name or mobile phone number.

And for an elected councillor:

Bias and Predetermination – if you are involved in making planning, licencing or other quasi-judicial decisions, do not say anything through social media (or indeed anywhere) that suggests you have completely and irrevocably made your mind up on an issue that is due to be formally decided upon. While your likely view on a particular application may be well known, you need to be able to show that you attended the committee or hearing prepared to take on board and weigh all the evidence and arguments, and were genuinely persuadable to a different view. If you weren't, the decision may be later challenged as invalid. If a person has suffered some sort of detriment as a result of such an invalid decision, they may have a claim against the Council for damages.

2. Wealden District Council and Social Media

2.1 Wealden District Council operates a number of *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts and monitors activity involving Wealden District Council and its Members. Our *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts provide another way of reaching out to local residents. Their primary aim is to encourage people to access information and services available on our web pages and those of our partners. They also enable us to advise on service interruptions, clarify misinformation and help with residents' queries and concerns. Access to these corporate accounts is limited to named officers. Staff may prefer to use these accounts for work-related social media activity. Your line manager will be able to advise on arrangements for your service.

2.2 Service requests are directed to the appropriate web page facility or the customer contact centre. Only information from agreed partners is promoted. This can include commercial concerns but only in direct connection with a specific Council project.

2.3 Before responding to criticism of the Council, the responsible officer should contact the Communications Officer or relevant Service Head to:

- clarify the facts
- provide an appropriate explanation of policy.

Once clarification or explanation has been made, and no new issues have been raised, officers will cease correspondence.

2.4 While adopting a more informal style, corporate Wealden accounts will:

- treat all individuals with respect.
- not be used to criticise individuals or organisations, even if invited to.
- not engage with people who are abusive, or use racist, sexist, homophobic or threatening language.
- not publish images of minors without the permission of the children's parents or guardians.
- not convey any political or commercial bias.
- do not disclose confidential information or the personal information of others.

3. Staff and Members' own social media accounts

3.1 Staff and elected Members should be aware of their obligations under the *Staff Code of Conduct* and the *Members' Code of Conduct*. Although many social media accounts allow users to adopt a made-up identity, they should be aware that their proper identity is likely to be revealed over time through its content and contact with others.

3.2 If talking about the Council, staff and Members should be clear about their own personal role and the service that they represent and not say anything that might bring the Council into disrepute.

3.3 Staff should always refrain from criticising named officers, service users or elected Members, and be aware of their duty of confidentiality with respect to Council information.

3.4 Staff are encouraged to take part in discussions on social media as an identified officer of the Council when they can contribute professional knowledge which can add value to the discussion.

3.5 Members should also refrain from criticising named officers, or expressing any views that are likely to compromise the impartiality of those who work for, or on behalf of the Council.

3.6 Furthermore, Members and officers should not accept a *Friend* request from a social networking site sent by a contractor providing services to the Council as this could imply close personal association. For the avoidance of doubt, this does not apply to sites which are intended as a neutral, professional connections registry (such as LinkedIn.)

3.7 If you are unsure how to respond, please get in touch with the Council's Communication Officer or Monitoring Officer.

Some dos and don'ts:

- Do try to make timely and relevant comments that you think other people will be interested in.
- Do take a moment to think before you respond to a comment – comments once made, leave a digital footprint for ever.
- Do be aware of the privacy settings on the site you are using.
- Do include photos and web links to help make your points.

- Don't re-tweet anything you do not know to be true.
- Don't comment in haste, particularly when you are angry or have consumed alcohol.
- Don't post comments that you would not be prepared to make on paper or face-to-face.
- Don't give out personal details such as your address or phone number.

And do feel free to support the Council's social media sites by *Liking* them, *Following* them and re-tweeting.

Jim van den Bos
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