



Social Media Acceptable Use Policies for Council Pages

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales

Key Issues:

This is a briefing based on a network query submitted by a local authority about acceptable use policies for social media.

Below is a summary of best practice from an analysis of over 40 local authority acceptable use policies, for use by councils when reviewing their own policies.

1.0 Background

Councils occupy many social media spaces as a way of informing residents about their services, and to provide important updates ([Wealden District Council's](#) policy, for instance, shows that they are active on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and NextDoor). Councils such as [Scottish Borders Council](#) recognise that social media presents opportunities to engage with residents and service users. Local authorities such as [Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council](#) state that they want users to have their say and that they do not censor comments even if they are critical of the council. [Cardiff Council](#) are also keen to stress that comments you make on social media will not affect or influence the service you receive from the Council. While most users are respectful, the development of house rules for social media has become necessary to ensure that discussions by residents are civil and relevant to the topic of the post. Social media accounts are managed by real people and it is important to protect employees, councillors and residents from unacceptable use of social media. In some cases, local authorities have

had to disable comments altogether on certain posts (e.g. due to mass coronavirus misinformation sharing). Below is an analysis of over 40 acceptable use policies from different councils across the UK. Whilst they had many similarities, their content varied considerably. This information may be useful when reviewing your own council's policy.

General guidelines

Every policy had a general guidelines section reminding people that they should not post abusive comments, should not swear, should not post the same message continually (known as spamming), should not post misinformation and should not post their personal information. [Charnwood Borough Council's](#) page lists the behaviours they will not engage with that includes: sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia or transphobia, ageism, ableism, intolerance of religion, inciting hate or harm, false information, harassment or threats. [North Northamptonshire Council](#) note that this just doesn't apply to text comments but also to videos, images, GIFs, attachments, links and emojis.

2.0 Moderation of social media

Active hours

Many councils will list the hours that their social media pages are monitored (e.g. Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm) and have a notice that they will be unable to respond to questions outside of these hours even if they post from those pages. [Derbyshire County Council](#) give an estimated response time of "within a few hours" in most cases. [Breckland Council's](#) policy lists an emergency contact number for an out-of-hours service.

Not allowing commercial advertising

Most policies made reference to not allowing commercial advertising on their Council social media pages. [Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council's](#) policy states that they cannot accept links, comments or wall posts promoting private businesses such as shops or restaurants, and instead encourages businesses to sign up with a local business community website run by the council.

3.0 Responding to residents

Responding to comments and queries

There was a lot of variety in how councils use their social media profiles to interact with residents. [Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council](#) suggest that you should not rely on social media to raise concerns or report issues, and [City of Edinburgh Council](#) suggest that while they are listening and will pass on comments as appropriate, in most cases it will be better to contact the service directly. [Nottingham City Council](#) note that their Facebook, Instagram and Twitter inboxes are not monitored and that their online My Account website should be used instead to contact the Council. [Breckland Council's](#) policy is similar, stating that as the council's social media staff often do not have access to customer records, queries should be submitted via web form, email or by calling the appropriate number. [Waltham Forest Council's](#) policy says that their Corporate Communications team who run the social media accounts will sometimes send your questions off to customer services or other colleagues to find out information for you. All of the above have slightly different ways of using their social media, with some directly interacting with residents' queries and others referring them directly to more traditional reporting methods.

Disabling comments on select social media posts

Many councils have taken to disabling comments on select social media posts. [Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council](#) stated that as standard they do not disable comments on their posts, but at their discretion they may disable comments on posts where they think this is the right action to protect the public and their employees. Similarly, [Oldham Council's](#) policy states that they may publish some posts without the function to comment and that this is done where they believe the comments will inflame the conversation around a sensitive topic. [South Tyneside Council](#) also occasionally have their comments section closed for a number of reasons, including only communicating essential information for awareness or the team or service wanting responses to be received through another channel.

4.0 Reasons for removing comments

Councils have many reasons stated in their policies for removing comments from their social media. [East Lindsey District Council](#) state that you should send them a private message if you notice any offensive comments on their social media channels. [Erewash](#)

[Borough Council](#) also recommend that if you are offended by a user's post, that you should report it directly to the social media network. Below are some of the reasons in policies that comments are removed:

Off-topic comments, swearing and fighting words

[Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council's](#) policy states that the conversation should be kept relevant to the post and contribute to the dialogue, and that they will remove off-topic content. Name-calling, profanity, fighting words, discriminatory terms, sexual harassment, bullying and defamatory language is not tolerated and reminds users that while they might think their comments are funny, others may not. Comments should be polite even if you disagree. [Derbyshire County Council](#) and [Glasgow City Council's](#) policies remind users that they must comply with the terms of use of the social media networks that comments are posted on as well as the council's own terms of use, and provide links to these for Facebook and Twitter. [Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council](#) and many others have set up profanity filters to automatically hide words which contain swearing or offensive words (but sometimes these do not catch everything).

Hate crime

[East Lindsey District Council's](#) policy is a good example of this; it states that comments that target or disparage any ethnic, racial, age, or religious group, gender, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, pregnancy & maternity or married & civil partnership status are prohibited and may be reported; they will remove or block any contributions or contributors who post hate-related messages on their accounts; depending on the content, they may also screenshot the posts and consider legal action or sending these onto the police for investigation.

Encouraging others to break the law

[North Lincolnshire Council](#) ask that users don't use their social media pages to encourage anyone to break the law, and remind them that you could be held accountable for this in a court of law. [Oldham Council](#) state that they will remove anything potentially libellous or any content that breaks the law including breaches of copyright.

Defamatory statements

[High Peak Borough Council's policy](#) defines a defamatory statement as something that lowers the reputation of a person or organisation in the eyes of a reasonable person.

[Braintree District Council](#) will take down any statement that they think could be defamatory, as publishing such a statement can lead to the person and the Council both getting in serious trouble.

Spreading misinformation

[North Herts Council](#) and others are alert to the possibility that their social media posts may be used as a means of spreading misinformation to residents; this may include posting false information or links to conspiracy theories about topics such as the coronavirus pandemic or vaccinations, which could indirectly cause harm to others. Comments will be removed and the author of those comments will be banned. [Derbyshire County Council](#) will also remove posts where they believe it contains misinformation.

Sharing personal and confidential information

[High Peak Borough Council's](#) policy state that you should not post your or anyone else's personal information such as contact or bank details on their open social media pages, and that customer service staff will only ask for this to be sent in a personal message.

[Midlothian Council](#) reserve the right to remove posts that contain private or personal information, and state that any information collected via social media will be treated as confidential in line with the principles of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Posting copyrighted content

While [Merton Council](#) welcome users to submit or post content including photos and videos that meet the standards of their policy, they are only to post their own original content. [Braintree District Council](#), [High Peak Borough Council](#) and many other policies advise users that they should not post content which has been copied from elsewhere that they do not own the copyright for.

Political neutrality

In the six-week run up to an election, councils have to be careful not to say or do anything that could be seen to support any political party or candidate. This restriction is imposed

upon councils by the [Local Government and Housing Act 1989](#). [Braintree District Council's](#) policy states that you cannot use any of their pages to promote party political messages and that they will remove any comments they think compromises their political neutrality. Similarly, [Bridgend County Borough Council](#) state that their accounts are non-political and that they may have to remove responses or ask users to remove responses if they could be construed as party political or inflammatory. [Glasgow City Council's](#) policy states that council officers are unable to reply, endorse or engage with any party political content and recommends that residents contact their local councillor if they wish to discuss political issues.

Comments that name individual council employees

[Derbyshire County Council's](#) policy states that they will remove comments which name individual council officers, and reiterates that if you wish to make a complaint about any council staff that this should be done through their formal complaint channels. [Central Bedfordshire Council's](#) policy also states they reserve the right to remove any materials including comments, pictures and videos that refer to council employees by name. [Wealden District Council](#) have a zero-tolerance approach towards fraud and corruption, and if an allegation is made on their social media accounts they will ask the person to report it to the police along with their evidence or report it via the council's online complaints form.

Allegations against other residents (safeguarding, anti-terrorism)

[West Northamptonshire Council](#) recommend that you do not make any safeguarding allegations or disclosures on their social media unless you are directly messaging them, and that it is better to raise these concerns directly with their children and adult social care services. [Barnsley Metropolitan District Council](#) in addition to having notices about allegations against council employees, elected members and regarding safeguarding, also have a notice about Prevent and Channel (preventing vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism); they note that comments will be passed onto the relevant organisations, and recommend that concerns are raised with a confidential anti-terrorist hotline or via the police, and have a link to further information on Prevent and Channel on their website.

5.0 Blocking protocols

The process for blocking users

The process for blocking users who break the rules set out by the Council vary from authority to authority. [Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council](#) will respond publicly to content and via direct message asking the offender to remove it immediately and tell them why they've removed it; the Council will block their access to social media pages if they do not amend or remove the content and will tell them they're doing this. [Brighton & Hove City Council](#) will not notify people directly when they are blocked and will not discuss on social media the reasons for a block being put in place.

Reporting to the police

Most policies make reference to potentially passing on information to the police in severe cases. [East Lindsey District Council's](#) policy states that depending on the content, they also screenshot posts and consider legal action or send them to the police for investigation.

Blocking based on an offensive username or profile picture, or fake profile

[Orkney Islands Council's](#) policy specifically states that they will block users who have an offensive username or uses offensive images as their profile picture (e.g. sexually explicit images). [Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council](#) also state that all posts should come from a real person and a real profile, and that content from fake or anonymous profiles will be deleted and the profiles will be blocked.

Appealing the decision to block

[North Herts Council](#) have the option after 12 months, where the owner of a blocked account can appeal the decision to block. [Buckinghamshire Council](#) have also stated this in their policy where users can appeal after 1 month.

6.0 Followed accounts

Follows and likes are not endorsements

Council acceptable use policies such as [Braintree District Council's](#) stress that a social media connection does not implicitly or explicitly endorse any individual or organisation.

Braintree note that they will maintain social media connections with organisations that are critical of them or have opposing views. Similarly, [Bristol City Council](#) state that they do not endorse any individual or organisation merely by virtue of creating a social media connection with them. [Bridgend County Borough Council's](#) policy states that they will sometimes follow or like people or pages that provide information that is pertinent to their work as a local authority or whose information they can pass on for the benefit of local people. [Waltham Forest Council](#) try to retweet information that they think will be of interest to residents and businesses, but ask that users please don't be offended if the council doesn't retweet something they are asked to; they also reserve the right not to follow accounts.

Removing followed accounts

There are many reasons why a Council may unfollow a previously connected social media account. [Fylde Council](#) stress that if you see the council have unfollowed you not to take this as a sign of personal rejection, and that unfollows may just be as a result of a review of accounts or a cutting down on numbers of followed accounts. [Plymouth City Council](#) alternatively will only remove a profile from its network for over-riding reasons such as a significant risk to the Council's reputation or a breach of their obligations to maintain political neutrality.

7.0 Other information for policies

Many of the Council social media acceptable use policies contain other information that may be relevant to include in your own policy.

Reserving the right to modify policies

[Newry, Mourne and Down District Council](#) reserves the right to modify or change the conditions of their policy at any time. [Brighton & Hove City Council](#) reviews their policy annually.

Links to all of your social media accounts

Some pages like [North Tyneside Council](#) include links to all of their social media accounts in their policy. [South Tyneside Council](#) also has a link to View a list of Council social media pages, as well as [North Lincolnshire Council](#).

Reminder about the social media policy for staff

[East Sussex County Council's](#) policy encourages those who work for the Council to see their intranet for their social media policy for those who use it as part of their job, as well as their policy for those using social media in a personal capacity.

Media enquiries

[Plymouth City Council's](#) policy contains a reminder that their social media platforms are not intended to be used by the media or politicians to contact the council. [Scottish Borders Council's](#) policy redirects members of the media to their media centre.

Freedom of Information requests

[Nottingham City Council's](#) policy has a section on freedom of information requests that directs people to their Access to Information section of their website and encourages them to take a look at already published information before submitting an information request.

Detailing who has the ability to post on council social media accounts

[Middlesbrough Council's](#) policy details who is authorised within the local authority to update social media pages representing the council or any council venue or service. It also contains detail on the conditions for the creation of social media accounts representing council venues and services.

8.0 APSE Comment

APSE encourages our members to consider the contents of this briefing when reviewing their social media acceptable use policies.

In addition, it is worth noting the following additional matters.

Social Media Abuse Directed at Councillors

Whilst overall abuse of councillors is rising according to a new report from the LGA at least 73% report this to be through social media. The [LGA Report Debate not Hate](#) can be downloaded through this link. Key findings include: -

- Scale: 88 per cent of respondents said they had experienced abuse and/or intimidation, directed at them personally, be it from a member of the public, or persons unknown, as a result or, or in relation to their role as a councillor, or whilst a political candidate.
- Frequency: 98 per cent of respondents who said they experienced abuse and/or intimidation said they had experienced such incidents on multiple occasions.
- Channel: Most abuse and/or intimidation had come via social media, with 73 per cent of the respondents with multiple experiences saying such networks has been used. In person abuse and/or intimidation was reported by 64 per cent of respondents.
- Timeframe: Those who had experienced abuse and/or intimidation were asked whether it had been encountered within the current month or over 24 months ago. Most frequently, for victims of multiple incidents, their first experience had occurred over 24 months ago.
- Triggers: 59 per cent of respondents said the abuse and/or intimidation was triggered by a specific event. And, of this group, 68 per cent said it was due to a particular decision that had been made.

These statistics are alarming and reflect evidence presented to the APSE Local Government Commission which shows that councillor abuse is increasingly an issue and social media is often used as a means to promulgate that abuse, but worrying leading to threats of physical attacks on councillors and their families as well as property and assets.

It is therefore essential for all councils to consider within social media policies the means by which such abuse is dealt with effectively on social media platforms and beyond. The

same of course is also true for officers who may find that they have no right of reply to wrongful statements made about them on social media platforms.

Accessibility Issues

A number of campaign groups have highlighted UK Councils and other public bodies for non-accessible social media use. An example can be found at @UKCouncilAltBot which is highlighting inaccessible tweets from UK councils and also government departments (@UKGovAltBot).

For accessibility and reading software suggests for twitter include: -

- Remember to capitalise the first letter in each new word for readability software e.g. #ApseStreetCleansing rather than #APSEstreetcleaning or #apsestreetcleansing. This is because readability software can pick up capitals at the start of a new word ensuring fair access to a user with a disability.
- The 'ALT' option for accompanying images or gifs allows the user to add alternative text to images; enhancing the Twitter experience for the visually impaired.

RNIB have issued similar guidance as well particularly around the use of images and video.

For a link to the RNIB Guide to Accessible Social media, [click here](#)

Further Training and Support from APSE

For more useful information on this topic, [APSE Training](#) runs a course on [Effective Social Media for Local Authorities](#) that is delivered online over two half-days and can be delivered in-house.

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