



North Hertfordshire District Council

Social Media Strategy

2018-2021

DATE: September 2018

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Social media is a powerful means of informing and listening to residents across the district, and as such plays an increasingly important role for the Council. It is therefore important that it is managed well from within the organisation, and to set out our objectives and expectations to the public to ensure it is successful. This strategy sets out how the Council currently uses social media, and proposes potential new arrangements to improve its outcomes.

2 Introduction

2.1 Social media networks offer the ability to reach a large number of people almost instantaneously, which makes them an invaluable communications tool.

2.2 They are a useful means of informing residents and customers about Council news, projects, services and events. By building a base of followers through frequent publishing of news and updates, it becomes possible to reach a far larger number of people that would be possible relying on either traditional print media, or visitors to the website.

2.3 Social media also has the advantage of reaching people who may not usually engage with their local authorities, and having no restrictions when it comes to timing: updates can be published at any time, multiple times, in order to reach the widest possible audience. The sites are also generally free to use.

2.4 Social media is managed by the North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) Communications team and certain officers in the Customer Service Centre through an online software package called Hootsuite.

3 Objectives for using Social Media

- 3.1 To give residents a convenient digital way of being able to stay informed about the work of the Council and a means of getting in touch.
- 3.2 To be an informative, helpful and friendly online presence.
- 3.3 To deal with customer queries in a timely manner.
- 3.4 To share information about events and opportunities in the district.
- 3.5 To champion North Hertfordshire as a place to live and work.
- 3.6 To provide updates on services when they are disrupted or during an emergency situation.

4 Current Situation

4.1 NHDC has a corporate presence on the following social media platforms:

Social network	Date joined	Main activities
Twitter	2009	News, promotional activities, customer interaction
Facebook	2014	News, promotional activities, customer interaction
YouTube	2010	Video and audio file hosting
Flickr	2010	Photo sharing
Instagram	2018	Photo sharing, promotional activities
LinkedIn	2015	Job vacancy publicity

4.2 Facebook and Twitter

The bulk of our focus currently lies with Twitter and Facebook, two of the most popular social networks worldwide. We have nearly 10,000 followers on Twitter and are approaching 1,500 likes on Facebook. We actively engage with residents and other users on these networks by posting links to news updates, community events, and regional and national social awareness campaigns. We also respond to individual customer queries on these channels where possible.

4.3 Analytics data allow us to measure the success of our posts in terms of the number of views they receive and their click-through rates. We can also track engagement levels, for example those people who have commented on or liked our posts. We are also able to track sentiment of posts. This analytical data in turn allows us to judge when future posts should be scheduled to reach the largest possible audience and helps us tailor future messages according to what our followers are most interested in.

4.4 Flickr, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn

The other social networks we have a presence on allow us to broadcast information, but with no expectation of individual interaction or customer service.

- 4.5 Flickr is a photo sharing site aimed at photography enthusiasts and professionals. In the past we used to post photos to Flickr as a means of promoting the district as a vibrant and attractive place to live and work. In particular we used it to show the progress in the construction works for Hitchin Town Hall and Museum. However, Flickr's decline as a social media force has meant we no longer actively use it.
- 4.6 Instagram is a photo and video sharing social network, and is particularly popular among young people. Since February 2018 we have been experimenting with using Instagram instead of Flickr as a means of sharing images to promote the district. We have quickly grown a base of over 500 followers, though it is difficult to quantify the impact our posts have as yet.
- 4.7 YouTube is a well known and widely used video sharing website. Though NHDC has had an account for several years, it has not published a great deal there, due to the time and cost required in developing good quality video content. Recently the audio recordings of the Local Plan Examination hearings were uploaded there as an easy solution to making them publicly available. The communications team are also actively looking at opportunities to create or share video content so that we can improve our digital offer to residents.
- 4.8 LinkedIn is a business professional social networking site, and is one of the most popular services for job hunting. NHDC's profile page sets out who we are and what we do, and we regularly post updates promoting vacancies currently available.
- 4.9 Certain NHDC services such as the North Herts Museum and Herts Careline, also maintain their own social media profiles. This is done with the agreement of the Communications team, who determine if there is a legitimate case for a new social media presence, and that levels of resourcing have been fully considered. A policy on use of social media by staff for work purposes can be found on the Council's Intranet.
- 4.10 In general, it is preferable for the main corporate social media accounts to act on behalf of other services and publish their messages, to ensure engagement is properly managed and resourcing is available. It is accepted however, that there are some circumstances which make a distinct social media presence

desirable.

4.11 In the case of the services in the table below, they already operate or promote themselves to the public at arm's length from the Council, or work in an area more akin to a commercial environment and therefore benefit from a more independent presence online. The Communications team support these services by offering advice and guidance when needed, and sharing their content on the main corporate accounts.

Service	Social networks
North Herts Museum	Twitter Facebook Instagram
Herts Careline	Twitter Facebook
Hitchin Town Hall	Facebook Instagram

5 Management and Development of Social Media

5.1 Management of initial response and assigning enquiries

5.2 Currently the Communications team lead on all engagement on social media – publishing all general outbound messages, and assigning all inbound enquiries and messages to its own team or to the Customer Service Centre if the query relates to a straightforward customer service enquiry.

5.3 Generally this arrangement works well, as by assigning messages, it can easily be seen that one person is dealing with a particular message, however as volumes of enquiries increase, both teams need to ensure they have enough resource that can be dedicated to dealing with enquiries.

5.4 If volumes of straightforward customer enquiries increase, it may make sense in the longer term for the Customer Services team to take the lead on assigning queries, however often posts have a potential wider reputational impact and therefore it makes sense currently for the Communications team to do so.

5.5 When responding to individual customer enquiries on social media, it is common practice among organisations for the responder to sign or initial their reply (e.g. adding “^GM” at the end) so that the customer is assured that their query is being handled by a real person. It also improves accountability by making it easy to see who participated in any customer interaction. Though NHDC does not currently initial its responses, it is a positive course of action which should improve customer satisfaction on social media, and should therefore be implemented or trialled.

5.6 Dealing with comments on other Facebook groups

5.7 As an organisation we have a corporate page on Facebook rather than an individual profile. Therefore we are unable to monitor or respond to comments made about North Hertfordshire District Council on other pages or groups e.g. ‘We are from Hitchin, Hertfordshire’. Unfortunately on occasion inaccurate information is circulated via these sites and there is little we can do to correct this. We could set up individual profiles to do so, however the resource involved

in monitoring them would be extremely time intensive. We should therefore only respond to queries directly posted on our own social media pages.

5.8 Monitoring and reporting interaction with customers on social media

5.9 Customer feedback through normal channels (e.g. telephone calls) is monitored and recorded by the Customer Service team for reporting purposes, and categorised in to comments, compliments and complaints (also known as the 3Cs). Social media is not included as part of this activity, largely for logistical reasons; the sheer quantity of comments and interactions would make it extremely time-consuming to compile and analyse the data. It is also partly due to the conversational and informal nature of social media: users discussing or mentioning NHDC do not always expect or require a response. They may discuss their customer experience of NHDC in a positive or negative way, but social media is an open space for public discussion – very different from raising a complaint (or comment or compliment) directly with the Council.

5.10 Customers can of course interact directly with NHDC on social media to raise a specific issue; however this is dealt with quickly and informally where possible. Queries of a personal nature may be moved to a more appropriate channel, where it would be treated as a standard customer service query or a 3Cs interaction. Queries received through social media are not currently subject to response time targets in the same way as other channels.

5.11 Interaction with users on social media is monitored instead through regular dashboard reporting to SMT. These includes key data such as engagement (replies, likes, etc.), mentions, tags (each post is assigned a tag, such as Waste, Grounds Maintenance, Council Tax, etc.) and follower numbers.

5.12 Factors to consider when evaluating a new social network

5.13 Social media is a continually growing and evolving environment, as new networking sites take off in popularity while others decline. As such it would be difficult, if not futile, to set out any hard and fast rules for when NHDC should look at creating a new presence on a social network.

5.14 In general however, the following can be considered as useful questions to ask if joining a new social network is being contemplated:

- Is there likely to be a regular flow of content to publish to justify creating the presence?
- Does the social network have a sufficient number of users to make it worth spending the time and effort in maintaining a presence there?
- Is it particularly popular among an audience with whom the Council wishes to increase engagement e.g. young people, older people?
- Is it possible to monitor the reach of posts published on the site, to determine how widely viewed they are?
- Can messages drafted for an existing social network be easily adapted to fit the new site, in order to minimise the extra work required to publish posts?
- Could the site be used to communicate updates during an emergency situation or a period of service disruption?

5.15 Policy for publication on website

5.16 It is common for organisations to publish a social media policy or code of practice on their website in order to set out clearly how that organisation uses social media, what users can expect from it, and what it expects from users in return.

5.17 The aim of the policy is to help avoid unpleasant or unacceptable treatment of staff, and to protect the organisation's reputation. From NHDC's perspective it is important to clarify how we aim to help anyone who contacts us via social media, but also that it may not always be possible or suitable to do so.

5.18 A policy for the NHDC website is attached to this strategy in section 6. It sets out:

- How to find our social media channels
- What we use social media for
- When we monitor social media
- How to contact us
- What we view as unacceptable behaviour
- How we deal with unacceptable behaviour

6 Social media policy for use on website

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 We can be found on the following social media networks:

- [Follow us on Twitter](#)
- [Like us on Facebook](#)
- [Follow us on Instagram](#)
- [Follow us on LinkedIn](#)

6.1.2 We post messages about the services we provide to over 125,000 residents, as well as information about events and opportunities in the district.

6.1.3 Our aim is to raise awareness of all that the Council and North Hertfordshire have to offer.

6.1.4 We monitor our social media pages between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday. We do not monitor or respond to posts outside of normal office working hours.

6.2 Contacting us

6.2.1 We try and reply to every customer query and message we receive but, due to high volumes, this is not always possible. Due to very high volumes, we do not respond to all comments made on our social media platforms, only to those where residents are asking us to deal with a service request or asking a customer service query.

6.2.2 We aim to initially respond to questions and requests for service within one working day. On some occasions during busy periods this may not be possible, but we will respond to you as soon as we can.

6.2.3 For general enquiries we recommend you contact us via our website's Do It Online portal which you can find at www.north-herts.gov.uk or using our customer service centre 01462 474000 (open 9am-5pm Monday to Friday).

- 6.2.4 In an emergency and outside of office hours, please use our [emergency contact details](#).
- 6.2.5 During an emergency or during times of significant service disruption, it is our policy to post all latest service or situation updates on our website and this would be the main channel of communication that we direct customers to for information. In this scenario we may post messages outside of our normal hours, but it is unlikely we will be able to reply to individual queries, as resources to man social media channels would be limited and may need to be diverted to other contact channels. In these instances we reserve the right to direct customers to other channels to complete their service request or query, as this will often be the most efficient and quickest way of speaking to us.
- 6.2.6 If your enquiry needs further investigation or is of a sensitive nature, we may direct you to other, more suitable contact channels. This is done so that your enquiry can be answered by the most appropriate officer, as well as to ensure your data is properly handled.

6.3 Our social media policy and process

- 6.3.1 Our social media accounts are managed by real people. We strive to be helpful and understand you may have frustrations with our services or those of our contractors and partners. We encourage public debate and people are free to share their views about the Council. We have no intention of stifling discussion about us as an organisation. However, we ask that you are respectful. Abuse will not be tolerated.
- 6.3.2 The vast majority of people who use social media do so with tolerance and respect, however a small minority can spoil it for everyone. This policy aims to protect our employees, councillors and residents from unacceptable use of social media. Unacceptable behaviour includes (but is not limited to) abusive or bad language, degrading remarks, or attempts to provoke or upset other users. We reserve the right to take action in relation to social media posts or messages which:
- are abusive, harassing or threatening
 - use sexist, racist or other unacceptable language which are intended to cause concern / harm

- are defamatory or libellous
- may be in contempt of court
- break any other law or incite someone else to break the law
- contain inappropriate material (including images or video)
- are spam.

6.3.3 In the event of unacceptable behaviour we will follow a set process:

- Firstly we will record the name and handle of the account, the date, social media post and why it is unacceptable
- We will delete or hide any posts which we view to be offensive. Following this we will usually issue a written warning, after consulting with the Communications Manager and/or the relevant Service Director. This will usually be by means of a private direct social media message in the first instance with a link to our social media policy
- If unacceptable behaviour continues or is extreme, the Council will consider blocking the user from interacting with us on social media. After 12 months the owner of the account can appeal the decision to block. Any decision to reverse the block will be made in conjunction with the Chief Executive. We reserve the right to block any user from interacting with us on social media at any time.
- If we block any social media user the Communications team will record the decision and make the Chief Executive aware. We may also report the matter to the Police where behaviour amounts to abuse or harassment or a criminal offence is suspected.

6.3.4 This policy adheres to the principles set out in the Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy Statement, published on the Complaints page of the NHDC website. The policy states:

- All customers will be dealt with in a fair, honest and consistent way.
- Services are accessible to all customers. However we may restrict or change access to services when a customer behaves in an unacceptable way.
- We will make sure that the physical and emotional safety of customers, visitors and Council employees is not at risk from any customer who behaves in an unacceptable way.

- We will alert the Police if it is considered that there is an immediate danger to staff or customers.

6.3.5 Queries on this policy should be directed to pressoffice@north-herts.gov.uk.