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## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMUNICATION PROCESS**

### **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 This report provides information about the way the Council uses social media to provide information and advice on policies, proposal, initiatives, activities, etc. The arrangements for the preparation and issue of press releases are also explained.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The Council uses a number of different channels to reach residents. There is no doubt that 'social media', commonly taken to mean websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking, is an important and growing component of the channels available to local councils to communicate with residents.

- 2.2 Social media in different incarnations provides an opportunity for the Council to communicate actively with residents to provide information and advice about Council business, to celebrate events that take place in the District, to advise of consultations and the publication of documents, and to enable a dialogue, when appropriate, on projects or proposals. This is not an exhaustive list.

- 2.3 At present, the Council:

- Places information on a website with key topics highlighted
- Live chats/videos on the website
- Tweets
- Delivers information directly to registered users through 'Tell Me More' (TMM)
- Places information on Facebook
- Issues press releases by email and through social media
- Provides photographs and information via Instagram

Coincidentally, work is in progress to consider how best the Council can develop its use of social media platforms.

### **3 COMMENTS ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

3.1 The Review Committee received a submission from a local resident at its meeting on 5 September 2017. A commentary on the points raised in the submission is set out in the Appendix to this report.

3.2 Key points to note are:

- The Council has been modestly successful at attracting users to our social media platforms.
- The Council is making use of Twitter, but there is a need to ensure that posted information does not breach any legal controls such as the Equality Act. On Facebook, for example, this means that posts must be vetted before publication.
- There is no doubt that the established social media channels provide a powerful and immediate way to communicate information to residents, though the TMM, which is a subscription service, provides a better degree of control.
- The Council has approaching 10,000 subscribers to TMM.
- Options are being considered to expand and develop the use of social media.
- Details of Council meetings are circulated via TMM. Other options might be considered.
- The Council has used a range of different events to promote TMM and to sign-up users to the service.
- Younger residents tend to use Snapchat and Instagram, whereas older residents tend to use Facebook. The Council needs to consider the different channels to best engage with residents. The Communications Team are currently investigating the use of GIFs on Facebook and Twitter to encourage a younger following.

### **4 ARRANGMENTS FOR PREPARING PRESS RELEASES**

4.1 There are a number of reasons for issuing a press release, and these are usually prepared in parallel with information being published through social media channels and TMM.

4.2 There are no hard and fast rules for issuing a press release, but custom and practice tends to a short statement about an event, a council decision, a consultation, service updates, for example waste collection changes, or a response to an emergency. In most, though not all, cases a quote will be obtained; this will usually be from the relevant Portfolio Holder, Committee Chairman, or from the Council's Leader/Deputy Leader for corporate matters,

except that in the purdah period before an election when a quote may be provided by a senior officer.

- 4.3 A press release will be drafted by an officer in consultation with the communications team. The communications team will then check the wording and finalise any quote with the Portfolio Holder, as required. The use of photographs is encouraged to accompany press releases as this can significantly increase the profile of the story both with the media and via social media channels. The press release is then issued to a range of media organisations, including the local press, and, where relevant, regional or national media/websites
- 4.4 A copy will also be sent to Member Services for inclusion in that week's Members' Bulletin.
- 4.5 All Council press releases will be issued in a standard format to ensure consistency and awareness of the Council's brand.
- 4.6 When a press release is issued it will also be circulated to Members, Assistant Directors and Directors, Customer Services, Parish Councils and local MPs.
- 4.7 The success of the press release is measured by media coverage, either in print, radio/television broadcast, website publication and social media views/comments.

## **5 RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 There is a need for a degree of control over the use of social media by the Council in terms of reputational risk. Where a social media platform is open to comment, there is a need to read posts before they are published and keep a continuous review on posts made by external parties to ensure that any posts made are not of an offensive nature.

## **6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 Annual cost of any software: TMM has an annual charge.
- 6.2 Social media is rapidly evolving and it is very important to keep up to date with the latest developments to ensure it is being used to its full potential and that as an authority the Council remains relevant with its residents.
- 6.3 The management of social media is by the communications team and expansion of the use of social media is likely to require additional resources.

## **7 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 There would need to be some awareness and control over content being published on social media to ensure the Council is compliant with legislation on issues such as data protection and copyright.

**8 RECOMMENDATION**

- 8.1 It is proposed that the Committee notes the report and considers whether to make any recommendations to Council on the use of social media.



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**Background Papers:-**

None.

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**Social Media – Information for Review Committee 9 January 2018**

This paper provides a commentary on the submission on the use of social media sent to the Review Committee and considered at their meeting on 5 September 2017.

**Comments on submission**

*Point 1 - I note that, as of writing this, the Rochford District Council Facebook page has 1,365 followers and the Twitter page 3,841 followers. Out of how many residents? The penetration percentage of these modern communication platforms is incredibly low.*

Response - From a comparison with Castle Point, who have had been using their Twitter account actively since March 2009 (two years longer than RDC), the figures are very similar. The figures for Maldon DC are also in the same range.

The figures for Facebook followers show RDC more than doubling the numbers for the Castle Point page and we also compare very well to Maldon who have 563 followers.

As a local authority we are performing as well on Twitter as other similar sized authorities and are considerably ahead with our Facebook following.

**Twitter**

RDC Corporate feed – 4088  
Business – 594  
Sport – 655  
Windmill – 430  
Rochford Public Health - 18  
Set up 2009, not used until Sep 2011

**Total followers - 5785**

Castle Point Corporate feed - 4450  
Business - 604  
Leisure - 968  
Active from 2009

**Total Followers – 6022**

## Facebook

RDC Followers – 1610

RDC Likes - 1567

Castle Point Followers – 689

Castle Point Likes – 669

The 'Tell Me More' platform, which enables the Council to push communications to residents and interested parties, currently has 7507 unique subscribers, 13469 subscriptions with an average engagement rate of 79%.

*Point 2 - Twitter is a relatively straightforward tool. Currently the Rochford District Council page follows only 179 people, but by reviewing all area related pages and following the people that follow them will generate a wave of mutual following and awareness of your own Twitter page.*

Response - We tend to avoid following personal/individual accounts as this can lead to some very 'unsavoury' items appearing on the Council Twitter feed, something that cannot be allowed to happen, based on past experience.

The Communications team will continue to review the followers and be mindful of opportunities to add to the current list where this is appropriate and linked to Council business.

Customer Services are using twitter as well to answer basic enquiries, but it is anticipated that usage will expand to individual departments in the near future.

*Point 3 - 10,000 followers should be an achievable target but the content needs to be more conversational as opposed to bulletin driven.*

Response – The use of social media by a local council is not a matter of competition for followers, as appears to be the case with some users of this platform. The reality is that we already provide information to 7507 users of our 'Tell Me More' platform. Twitter and other social media are part of a wider programme of informing and advising residents.

The Council does not employ a dedicated social media officer; any time spent on social media has to be fitted around other priorities. The Council does publish a mix of informative and conversational tweets, but often conversations are carried out by private messaging as personal details are usually required.

We are always looking to develop the way we use social media. A new morning messaging system is soon to commence, which will involve sending a tweet/message every morning to say "Good Morning, the Communications Team are here and ready to take your enquiries. We will be available @RochfordDC until 16:00 this afternoon". This initiative is intended to encourage followers to contact us and to demonstrate that we want to interact with them via this method.

*Point 4 - Regular #FollowFriday on Twitter is an opportunity for the Council to provide additional points of contact for the community along with why they would be worth following.*

Response - We have been involved in Twitter/Facebook campaigns and have had a good response rate of 'retweeting' and 'liking', etc. The Comms Team is considering options for greater involvement in 'National Days'. In addition, consideration is being given to the wider use of social media by council departments.

Encouraging and acting on feedback would allow the Communications Team to tailor the service for customers' needs. We could use [www.twtpoll.com](http://www.twtpoll.com) to create a poll for our followers; this would encourage interaction/conversation.

*Point 5 - Content is key to engagement; announce the council meetings that the public are welcome to attend but take the time to explain exactly what that meeting covers and why it matters to the public. If you cannot explain the benefits of the meeting to the public then there would be no point having the meeting.*

Response - We currently send out agendas for council meetings via #TELLMEMORE alerts. There is no reason why additional tweets cannot also be sent out to complement the alerts.

*Point 6 - All of the above is of no use without a ground plan. How can you, as a council, engage with the public face to face? If there is a specific council chosen charity, arrange with local supermarkets to spend a morning and/or afternoon engaging with the shoppers in the foyer while raising funds for a good cause.*

*Another thought is to have a specific annual fun day aimed at under 14's, there is a lack of these activities that are free to attend in communities. An event such as this would give you a captive audience to talk to, to engage with and to seek feedback from your communities. A budget set aside for community engagement would be money well spent.*

Response – The Chairman of the Council has a designated charity and this is publicised through social media, the website and so on. The Chairman is currently in the process of filming a short video for all the schools in the district; we can use this as a method to interact with the younger audiences and further promote our social media platforms.

Consideration is being given to starting another feed, possibly in Instagram (which is the most popular social media with young people) aimed specifically at younger people. This could feature events in the area, bus/train times, competitions, work experience, etc.

We also regularly use events to encourage residents to sign-up for 'Tell Me More', Wild Woods Day, for example, and staff do arrange for social media posts to come

from such events. Our next event is the 2017 Sports Awards ceremony which always has a very good participation on social media and is used by the press who use Twitter very actively, retweeting and sharing council updates. This year we plan to use Facebook Live to further add to our social media facilities.