



Corporate Management Team
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For Action

Report Title: Social Media Strategy & associated policies and processes

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1. Introduction

With local authorities continuing to face unprecedented budget cuts, it is vital that the council continues to strengthen and improve its use of social media both to improve the way we engage with local communities and also to help support budget savings through channel shift. In line with the **Community Access Strategy**, which sets out Brent's approach to encouraging online service delivery by driving traffic to our online transactionality (currently our website, but increasingly in future functionality we can embed elsewhere). Active engagement in social media can play a substantial role in helping people choose an online solution (by making it attractive, convenient and well-known – or digital by preference), rather than just be forced into using one (by withdrawal of other approaches – or digital by default).

Social media, if used strategically and optimised for delivery, will help the council achieve its high level priorities of reducing the cost of service delivery whilst improving quality and increasing access channels.

It has the secondary, parallel function of allowing the council to engage with residents through modern, accessible channels, alongside improving reputation among customers, businesses, stakeholder's and staff, as well as across the sector.

This social media strategy therefore is a delivery mechanism for both the Borough Plan and Corporate Plan and fully supports the Community Access Strategy which aims to deliver savings by:

- developing an improved digital offer
- significantly increasing take up and use of digital channels
- developing a consistent and excellent experience for our customers whenever and however they make contact with us, leading to a better customer experience and more consistent service standards.

1.1. What is social media?

Social media is a collection of online communication channels that allow people to create, share or exchange information, conversations, pictures and videos. It connects us to what people are saying, doing and thinking in Brent and indeed the world.

The growth of social media has been boosted by the fact you no longer need a PC to access it. Smartphones easily connect to the internet when people are out and about. As a result, social media interactions with the council have increased and the expectations of receiving a prompt response have risen.

Social media channels are by their very nature generally very informal, two-way, immediate, and reliant on interesting content. They are also very peer-to-peer, rather than reliant on a large public body to broadcast one-size-fits-all messages. Councils successful in delivering business benefits through their approaches to social media are those that recognise these inherent characteristics of the medium and use a bespoke approach (albeit consistent with their council values) rather than trying to apply an existing approach to old media (e.g. multiple layers of sign-off rightly required for media relations).

It's important to recognise that the scope of social media contains not just the most well-known online chat or online content sharing sites like Twitter and Facebook, but also includes massively popular, influential and trusted sites like Mumsnet and increasingly app-based presences such as Eventbrite (which the council already uses, for free, to organise ticketing for free events).

1.2. How we use social media

- **Communication** – connecting the public with news, information, events, increasing awareness of services available and an essential tool for communicating during emergencies and major events.
- **Engagement** – gathering intelligence about ongoing issues and gauging public opinion. We can help to improve residents' knowledge and limit misconceptions.
- **Collaboration** – finding more efficient ways of working together and sharing information with residents on other services available.
- **Customer services** – answering concerns or issues, directing customers to where they can find more information or correct the problem in an effective and timely manner – ideally and wherever possible through self-service rather than a one-on-one online engagement.

1.3. Benefits and risk

Social media offers considerable benefits, but its use also exposes the council to risk. Benefits include:

- cost effective way of engaging new and growing audiences
- ability to generate support or advocacy for a campaign
- ability to increase access to services to different audiences including hard-to-reach groups
- providing an opportunity for the council to become more active in its relationships with residents, partners and stakeholders
- quick and responsive channelling of public feedback as well as council input
- ability to shape opinion and increase behaviour change
- ability to integrate and potentially reduce dependence on other print and digital communications channels
- ability to counter inaccurate press coverage.

Risks include:

- inconsistent messaging being issued by the council
- insufficient resource to maintain the accounts
- insufficient ability to moderate the account
- unpredictability of customer response
- data and financial security considerations of online transactionality through third-party sites
- information, once published, can remain online indefinitely

- rapid proliferation of negative feedback*
- low control over Brent Council comments on third party sites*
- third parties impersonation of Brent Council*

***It should be noted that the last three of these downsides exist regardless of Brent's active involvement in social media – and indeed may well be more acute in our absence. Councils not participating in social media still have people shouting angrily about them – they just don't know about it, and don't take the opportunity to engage, influence and sometimes turn around negative perceptions.**

1.4. Who are our audiences?

Our social media channels are growing on a daily basis:

- Twitter – 10,597 followers ** (Average 12 new followers per day)
- Facebook - 3,294 likes ** (Average 7 new likes per day)
- YouTube – 180 subscribers **

This evidences a growing captive audience on our channels, ones that are actively interested and engaged with council news and business and have chosen to follow us.

There is clear evidence of this channel becoming more popular with residents, as detailed in the data snap shots below:¹

Twitter Usage	Percentage of Brent Households
Every day	21
Most days	15
Monthly	7.2
Weekly	7.2
Not at all	49.7

Given the growing proportion of residents with access to smartphones and tablet devices, this Social Media Strategy is vital to ensure the systematic dissemination of information and monitoring of residents' reaction, as well as the detection of emerging issues.

It should also be noted that an increasing proportion of online interactions – in many studies, now having reached a majority – are now through mobile devices (smartphones and tablets),

¹ London Borough of Brent – Mosaic Twitter usage data 2015

** Stats as of 10th August 2015

meaning that citizens increasingly do their business, read their news and share/form their opinions in snatched moments whilst on the move.

1.5. Channels

The council's web team manages the council's five Twitter accounts, YouTube, Instagram, Flickr, and LinkedIn.

Channel	Purpose
Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• news and information• emergencies• signposting• customer services• encourage participation in consultations
Facebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promoting campaigns• showcasing photos• useful info about council services• building relationships and showing support on local groups• encourage participation in consultations
Flickr	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• online photo gallery showcasing images from events
YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promoting and filming large events• internally – training videos• announcements of changes to services• "how to" guides
LinkedIn	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promoting job vacancies• promoting the council

The emerging relative interaction between public bodies' presence on social media channels and their own websites is worth noting. Although the council's website will remain the authoritative accumulation of both information and transactional business, more and more information is shared instead via other sites, and more and more business done via functionality directly embedded elsewhere on the internet.

What this means in practise is that many times more Brent residents are likely to read information about Brent services or campaigns targeted at parents of new-borns (e.g. a breast feeding campaign) if appropriately targeted at Brent residents on Mumsnet (which is readily do-able due to the way such sites organise themselves) than if (only) posted on a page on the Brent Council website. Spending scarce cash resources advertising on such sites or allocating scarce Brent staff time to participating in Mumsnet chatrooms and forums

is often likely to provide a much greater return on investment than similar spend/activity in driving traffic to a Brent Council webpage.

In due course, and only when fully consistent with proper data and financial security considerations, the development of widgets to embed into existing third-party sites to allow direct transactionality with the council will provide further cost-effective opportunities for growth in channel shift and self-service.

1.6 Given the benefits of social media, we will use our channels to proactively:

- Communicate with the public, with real time information during emergencies and major events.
- Gather intelligence about ongoing issues and gauge public opinion.
- Issue regular updates on Twitter and engage with stakeholders where appropriate.
- Use Facebook to promote major events in Brent, using a multimedia platform of video and photos, and allow visitors to share their own photos.
- Ensure that Brent is following key decision makers and influential blogs.

2. Strategy

The following is offered for CMT's consideration as a statement of objectives and principles to determine Brent's strategic approach to social media.

- Brent recognises that a large and growing proportion of local people (on various measures, a majority) use a wide range of social media channels both to undertake daily business tasks important to their lives, to find their news and service information they're interested in, and to share and discuss their views (including about the council). Equally, the council recognises that many people do not have ready access to such channels and/or prefer not to use them when interacting with the council and the services we provide. Our approach to social media as a council shall therefore recognise this diversity, and be proportionate. Put another way – we won't ignore social media, but nor will we over-invest in it to the exclusion of alternative approaches, including more traditional ways of doing business and engaging with local people.
- Our approach to social media as a council will be evidence-led – particularly when it comes to spending council staff time or money. That is, we will only participate routinely in social media where it measurably represents good value for money in contributing towards achieving our agreed council objectives. Overall, we expect our active and appropriate engagement in social media to save time and money both for local residents and businesses, as well as for the council itself.
- When it comes to supporting people in doing online business with the council, our use of social media shall be as a delivery tool for our already agreed

Community Access Strategy, and shall therefore be consistent with corporate approaches such as 'digital by preference' rather than 'digital by default'.

- When it comes to engaging with local people via social media, we'll adopt our existing council standards of honesty, integrity and customer-focus, albeit recognising and reflecting the often more informal nature of the channel in question.
- We will learn from best practise established elsewhere in our use of social media, but not be afraid occasionally to experiment and try new ways of serving local people – consistent with our other duties, including our accountability for public funds and achieving best possible value for money.
- The overall approach to engagement in social media channels shall be delivered centrally by the council's web team, but shall increasingly involve staff from across the authority – but only where the services' own time committed is proportionate to the achievement of their agreed local business objectives. For example, and as is current practice, Customer Service staff will handle certain categories of social-media generated individual customer service cases under an agreed protocol, which shall be regularly reviewed. It is also appropriate for popular public-facing services (like libraries, cultural and sporting facilities, who again already have a presence) to have their own social media profile managed locally within that service, with the central team providing training, guidance and proportionate quality assurance. It is more appropriate for various other services to have campaign-based social media presences (e.g. it is more suitable for adoption and fostering to have a recruitment campaign focus presence than it is to revolve around the service identity itself). Best practice elsewhere also shows that council services, such as procurement and HR recruitment, can benefit from running their own social media channels in this same way (often largely-automated) in line with their existing systems, and to afford wider public engagement (e.g. in encouraging local businesses to gain a growing share of council contracts).

Contact Officers

Peter Gadson, Director Policy Performance and Partnerships
Rob Mansfield, Head of Communications

Appendix A – operational processes and procedures to support delivery of Social Media Strategy

Day to day management

Hootsuite Enterprise is a social media management tool that we use to track and manage our social network channels in one place. It is used to monitor what people are saying about us and helps us to respond instantly or allocate to other departments to provide a response.

It also allows us to:

- identify and engage with influencers
- deliver content to multiple channels at optimal times for our audiences
- schedule posts
- measure results and optimise performance
- streamline the workflow by assigning follow-up actions to team members
- build brand awareness and loyalty
- proactively identify and resolve issues on social media before they escalate.

Assigning tasks

The web team has an overall responsibility to gather intelligence about ongoing issues and gauge public opinion by regular monitoring of the channels and key influencers accounts. Any emerging issues which could cause reputational damaging harm would be escalated to the relevant communications officers, for liaison with relevant lead departmental officers (and where appropriate, leading members).

One of the main goals is to actively engage in online discussions about issues related to the council's reputation. In order to achieve this we will need to actively search the web for mentions or discussions which take place on Social Media channels, blogs or webpages.

We can help to improve residents' knowledge and limit misconceptions by participating in online conversations taking place on local Facebook groups and other local community websites such as Streetlife. There are several local residents' groups discussing local topics and we can contribute to these by broadcasting to wide audiences, targeting individual communities and listening and responding to local conversations.

Although the central web team has the expertise in monitoring and responding, for the council to be properly impactful in this growing medium of communication, the willingness to respond appropriately needs also to be shared more widely within service departments. As a rule of thumb, if a service department thought it sensible in promoting their local objectives to attend a meeting at a community group to discuss a particular issue, then they should also be willing to engage with similar discussions online.

Webteam spots an issue where the council is being talked about as part of its routine monitoring	<p>Webteam takes a view on the nature of the online commentary (consulting communication officers and departmental officers as necessary), considering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the audience of the site/number of followers of the person commenting • the nature of the comments (including how critical they are) • the importance of the issue being discussed (including its ability to impact on our reputation) 	If of no particular consequence – no action (beyond continuing to monitor, in case it escalates)
		If an example of a person requiring customer services, pass on to relevant lead officers to assist (with substantive response usually inside 24 hours)
		If an example of a simple confusion or general comment over a well-understood issue (e.g. signposting to information on our website), webteam to respond directly
		If an example of a more specific ongoing conversation of relevance to a particular service area, webteam to discuss with relevant officers in that area, and support them in joining in the conversation appropriately (ideally themselves, rather than through the webteam)
		If an example of a more controversial issue, or a highly influential web commentator (e.g., someone with a high Klout score), and therefore more likely to impact more widely on the council's reputation, webteam to liaise with relevant communication officer (and service department officer lead, and occasionally leading members as appropriate) with webteam or communication officer responding

Professionalism and tone of voice

Anything written on Brent Council's social media channel reflects on the organisation, but given the relaxed style of social media, it is important not to appear overly formal.

DO

- engage and be sociable by starting conversations, sharing news and asking questions
- ensure you have the resource to post regular/daily content and respond to questions
- try to take difficult conversations out of the public domain and on to a private channel
- consider how you will deal with messages received out of hours
- contact the web team if you are unsure about how to deal with an issue

DO NOT

- ignore genuine questions or interactions
- post too often and become an annoyance
- take any political standpoint – just deal with the issue
- reveal confidential or sensitive information about the authority or your work
- delete posts/comments unless absolutely necessary (as the comment will likely be preserved somewhere, and it'll often take longer explaining why we deleted it)

Communications campaigns

Communications campaigns should be co-ordinated alongside annual communications forward planner and fortnightly communications grid. Press releases and campaigns should be scheduled into Communication Officer's overall plan and messages sent out on social media as necessary.

Freedom of Information (Fol) requests

Users can expect a response within 20 working days for Fol requests. To accept a request as Fol on Twitter, the Twitter user's real name should be visible in their public profile, or they must send information with an address for correspondence and the name of the applicant.

The limit on the length of a tweet is prohibitive to issuing a full response, so the information should be emailed to the applicant or published on our website with a link tweeted in reply.

More information can be found on The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) [ICO website](#)

Social media and staff

New social media accounts

Staff should NOT set up any new Twitter accounts, Facebook groups, pages or profiles, or take part in any social media activity on behalf of their service area without first consulting the webteam and the relevant head of service.

We will accept requests for new Twitter and Facebook accounts as long as they provide sufficient answers to the questions below:

- Who is your audience?
- What are your business objectives that a new, direct social media account would likely help you achieve?
- Why do you reckon that having your own media accounts would help you achieve these objectives better than simply providing content for the wider council's existing social media accounts?
- Having your own social media accounts carries with it an implicit duty to create regular, fresh, interesting content (that also meets basic council standards) – where providing occasional content through the council's existing channels means you can only need to do this work more occasionally, when you have something fresh and new to share – so are you sure that you want to take on this additional responsibility that comes with having your own channels?

The departments or services will be responsible for monitoring, updating and engaging with their audience. All new Social Media accounts are subject to the house rules as set by the Council's policy.

Personal usage

Officers must be aware that, that they may be identified directly or indirectly as a council employee, when using social media in a personal capacity it is expected they behave appropriately and in line with council values and policies. Any inappropriate online activity will not be tolerated by the council and may result in disciplinary action, and this applies whether the inappropriate online activity takes place during or outside of working hours.

The council may also be liable for the actions of officers who post comments or content on social media in a private capacity which are closely connected to the work environment.

It's your own personal choice whether or not you choose to participate in any kind of social media activity in your own time – the views and opinions that you express are your own. However, as a council officer you should be aware that any information which you post about Brent Council cannot be kept entirely separate from your working life. This is in line with the code of conduct for employees.

Any information published online can be accessed around the world in seconds and will be publicly available for all to see – and will often be retained electronically even if you subsequently delete it.

- For your social media accounts: Consider adding a disclaimer to your social media profile to make it clearer that your personal accounts are personal – for example: 'These views are my own'. Be aware though that this doesn't give you licence to share confidential information or bring the council into disrepute.

- check your online privacy settings so that you can understand who can see the information you publish and who can view your personal information. Be aware that sites like Facebook are renowned for often changing their privacy settings meaning that something that might previously have been private may now be viewed more widely.
- do not use a work e-mail address when registering on social media sites for personal use
- mature discretion should be exercised in all personal communications in a social media environment
- officers' obligations must be complied with in respect of other council policies when using social media, particularly around confidentiality.

Promotion

In order to increase followers on our social media channels we need to proactively promoting our channels by:

- promote channels on any printed material – letterheads and flyers
- include twitter handle and Facebook page on email signatures
- include social networks on electronic newsletters by incorporating them into the templates
- pro actively following people that follow us
- using hashtags regularly to join in other conversations and monitor trending hashtags for local areas. When we see a trend that relates to the council we can engage in that tweet chat by using the tag, and retweeting other people using the trending tag
- creating specific hashtags to create our own tweet community and localise tweets
- run giveaways and competitions for followers only.

The best way to increase audience size is to engage well in the first place, adding value and engaging authentically and appropriately with the audience, and providing good quality content. That way the audience will steadily grow organically, will be more likely to be retained, and much more likely to be actively engaged rather than just passively follow (but largely ignoring us).