Use of Social Media 2017-18
City of York Council
Memorandum

For: Assistant Director, Customer Services & Digital; Head of Communications
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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Social media constitutes an area of risk and opportunity for the council. On the one hand, using social media provides the council with a great opportunity to engage with residents in a positive manner. It can decrease response times and engage new audiences that may not otherwise communicate with the council. On the other hand, improper or inappropriate use of social media could result in harm to the council's reputation, staff productivity, or result in data protection breaches. Therefore, having a consistent, corporate approach to social media use across the council is vital to ensuring that risks are managed and benefits realised.

1.2   The council's Corporate Management Team approved an updated social media policy in January 2018 that was implemented from 1st May 2018.

Scope and Objectives

1.3   The aim of this audit was to follow-up on some initial work carried out in 2016/17. As part of the audit, a questionnaire was sent to officers and members to identify where and how social media is used across the council. The data was analysed and the results and any recommendations provided to the service to help inform the implementation of the updated social media policy. Further work to ascertain the level to which the new policy has been embedded may then follow.

1.4   The audit also provided advice on the new process for managing unacceptable behaviour on social media that was introduced at the same time as the new policy.

Key findings

1.5   The questionnaire was issued to 52 Heads of Service across the council and all 47 councillors, of whom 34 officers and 19 councillors responded. Fifteen officers and 13 councillors stated they used social media as part of their work, with the majority using it on a frequent basis (at least once per week).

1.6   Officers and councillors were asked about their aims in using social media, as well as the key benefits and risks associated with it. It was found that respondents used social media to engage with residents and to promote the council's services and work.

1.7   The key risks identified included the difficulty of controlling the spread of inaccurate or misleading content and inappropriate posts by members of the public (and how they are handled). However, it was found that fewer than half of officers have a process in place to review and approve content to ensure it is accurate and appropriate before it is posted.

2   FINDINGS

Number of Users and Social Media Platforms Used

2.1   The questionnaire was issued to 52 Heads of Service across the council and all 47 councillors, of whom 34 officers and 19 councillors responded. The questionnaire was issued to Heads of Service to get an understanding of which service areas use social media as part of their work. Of the respondents, 15 officers (44%) and 13 councillors (68%) stated they used social media.

2.2   The most common platforms used by both councillors and officers were Twitter (10 councillors, 13 officers) and Facebook (10 councillors, 7 officers). Other platforms are either not used (e.g. Flickr, Instagram) or are only used by a small number of respondents (3 councillors stated they used YouTube).

Frequency of Use

2.3   Of the 15 officers who stated their service areas used social media, 9 stated they used it once per week or more. Five others stated they used it once a month or less, of whom 3 stated that posts were uploaded on their behalf to the council's official Twitter account by the Communications team. However, one officer stated they had a separate account that was used less than once per month.

2.4   Of the 13 councillors who use social media, 10 of them use it once per week or more, while the other 3 use it once per month or less.

2.5   Updating social media accounts with new content on a regular basis is important in generating and retaining user interest. Accounts that are rarely updated may appear to be inactive or will lose other users' interest, thus decreasing the impact and reach of any posts. If an account is not checked frequently, then posts by other users may not be responded to in a timely manner. As the council is engaging with residents, this could lead to complaints.

2.6   It is suggested, therefore, that service areas that only post infrequently should do so through the council's official Twitter and Facebook pages, which are managed by the Communications team and are regularly updated.

Objectives and Benefits of Using Social Media

2.7   Officers and councillors were asked about their primary objectives for using social media and their target audiences. Responses were summarised in broad categories. They were also asked to rank a list of 5 benefits of using social media and these were then given a weighted average score out of 5.

2.8   The primary objective of officers was to raise awareness and publicity of council services, followed by providing updates about council services. Their target audiences were either specific service users or residents in general.

2.9 Officers saw engaging new audiences or hard to reach audiences as the greatest benefit of social media (a score of 3.82/5), with promoting the work of the council to residents in second place (3.58/5).

2.10 The primary objectives of councillors were to share information about current activities and council business, as well as engaging with residents and discussing political issues. The main target audience for councillors was ward residents, followed by members of the public in general.

2.11 Councillors saw engaging new audiences or hard to reach audiences as the greatest benefit of using social media (4.4/5), with listening and interacting with residents to better understand their concerns in second place (3.5/5).

Risks of Social Media

2.12 Officers and councillors were asked whether or not posts by members of the public are responded to; and whether any members of the public have been blocked from social media accounts. Officers were also asked whether or not posts are reviewed prior to posting. They were also asked to rank 4 risks of using social media, which were then scored out of 4 using a weighted average.

2.13 It was found that fewer than half of the officers whose service areas use social media review and approve posts prior to posting (7/15, 46.6%). Twelve officers and 9 councillors stated that they respond to posts by members of the public. However, only 2 councillors and 1 officer stated that they use and 'standard' or set responses. Seven officers stated that posts responding to members of the public are reviewed prior to posting, but only 4 of these have agreed response times.

2.14 Five councillors and 1 officer stated that they have blocked members of the public. The reasons given by councillors included: abusive or offensive content, accounts which are used to heavily advertise companies, and accounts not recognised by the user. The officer did not give a reason for blocking members of the public.

2.15 Officers and councillors both felt that the lack of control over the spread of content (especially inaccurate or misleading content) was the greatest risk of using social media (3.29/5 for officers, 3.5/5 for councillors).

2.16 Officers saw inappropriate posts by members of the public and how they are handled as the second most important risk (3.05/5), while councillors had this and posts by officers/members that are inappropriate or may breach data protection laws, as joint second (both 2.3/5).

2.17 Finally, both officers and councillors saw decreased productivity amongst staff as the lowest risk of using social media (1.42/5 for officers, 1.89/5 for councillors).

2.18   As the spread of posts on social media cannot be easily controlled, it is important to ensure that they are accurate and that their tone and wording is appropriate. This is also true of responses to posts made by members of the public. In both cases, inaccurate or inappropriate posts could lead to complaints, reputational damage to the council, or in extreme cases fines should content be posted that is deemed to breach data protection laws.

2.19   Although the risk scoring by officers and councillors above imply that there is some awareness of these issues, only around half of officers are reviewing posts to ensure that they are appropriate and very few have any 'standard' responses. To help improve the management of these risks, it is suggested that training is provided to officers who use social media on what is considered acceptable content and on implementing a review process to ensure content is accurate and appropriate.

Training and Guidance for Officers and Councillors

2.20   Finally, officers and councillors were asked what support they would like from the Communications team on managing their social media engagements. Twenty officers and 5 councillors responded to the question.

2.21   Thirteen officers stated that they would find training on policy and processes for dealing with unacceptable behaviours on social media to be beneficial. Eleven officers also wanted training on building audiences and keeping them engaged, while 9 felt that pre-prepared content to make it quicker to respond to members of the public would be of use to them.

2.22   Of the 5 councillors who responded to this question, 4 stated they would like training on building audiences and keeping them engaged. Two respondents asked for training on processes for dealing with unacceptable behaviours and two asked for pre-prepared content.

2.23   As noted at 2.9 and 2.11 above, the primary objectives of officers and councillors in using social media are to promote the work and services of the council and engage with residents on issues that are important to them. However, as discussed at 2.18-2.19, processes for ensuring that content is accurate and appropriate are not embedded across the council. Therefore, any training or support provided by the Communications team to officers and members should cover both risk management and engagement with audiences.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Of the officers and councillors who responded to the questionnaire, 44% of officers said their service areas and 68% of councillors said they used social media as part of their work. The most popular platforms used were Twitter and Facebook and the majority of respondents used social media on a frequent basis (once per week or more).

3.2 Officers and councillors use social media for a number of reasons, but the main objectives are promoting the work and services of the council to residents and engaging with new or harder to reach audiences. Both groups felt that they would like support from the Communications team in building audiences and keeping them engaged.

3.3 It was felt that the main risks of social media were the uncontrolled spread of inaccurate or misleading content and inappropriate posts by members of the public and how they are handled. However, it was found that processes to review and approve posts and responses or to handle inappropriate content are not well embedded across the council.

3.4 As part of the implementation of the new social media policy, it is suggested that the Communications team provide officers and councillors with training on processes for reviewing and approving content, responding appropriately to members of the public and referring them to be blocked under the blocking process where necessary. The Communications team should also consider establishing a monitoring list of all social media accounts associated with the council, along with the service areas and responsible officers. Finally, support and advice should be provided on how to build audiences and keep them engaged.