



## **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

### **Use of Social Media - Policy (Personal and Professional use)**

#### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Social Media plays a major role in the way the council\* conducts its business effectively. However, it is essential to protect the council's\* reputation and that of its staff and partners.
- 1.2 This policy applies to the use of social media for both business and personal purposes, whether during working hours or otherwise. It applies regardless of whether the social media is accessed using the council's\* IT facilities or equipment or equipment belonging to employees or others.
- 1.3 The policy should be read in conjunction with the standards expected of employees and those laid down in the Code of Conduct.
- 1.4 The council values the use of social media and this policy is not an attempt to stifle employees when using it. Employees should be aware of the details of the policy and ensure they adhere to it.

#### **2 Aims**

- 2.1 In order to meet the principles this policy sets out, the council\* will:
  - encourage good practice and ensure that all employees are clear with regard to the acceptable use of social media in a personal and professional capacity.
  - minimise the risk to the reputation of the council\*, its employees, partners and the people it serves.
  - attempt to prevent any inappropriate references to the council\* or the council's\* staff on social media sites.
  - protect employees from cyberbullying

#### **3 What is the definition of Social Media?**

- 3.1 Social media is the term commonly given to websites, online tools and applications which allow users to interact, often by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interest. Social media involves the building of communities or networks, encouraging participation and engagement.

- 3.2** Common social media formats include: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Bebo, MySpace, Yammer, blogs, podcasts, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. This is not an exhaustive list and this policy applies to **all** forms of social media.
- 3.3** Emails are not classed as social media for the purpose of this policy.
- 3.4** Social Media should never be used in a way that breaches any of Sandwell Council's\* other policies, procedures or guidance, including but not limited to:
- Disciplinary Policy
  - Officer Code of Conduct
  - ICT and Electronic Communications Policy
  - Equality Policy
  - Using photos on Social Media
- 3.5** Inappropriate use of social media can pose legal risks as well as reputational risks. Every employee therefore has a responsibility to maintain high professional standards of online behaviour. This policy applies to all employees, agency workers and volunteers of Sandwell Council\*.

## **4 Personal Use of Social Media**

- 4.1** The council\* recognises that access to social media for personal use is widespread. Whilst they are not acting on behalf of the council\*, employees must be aware they can damage the council\* if they are recognised as being one of its employees. Employees should be aware the use of social media, including personal use, that breaches this policy, could lead to disciplinary action.
- 4.2** Great care should be taken when making a comment, post or blog, or 'liking' a post as it has the potential to be widely read / seen and re-distributed. Communications can be misinterpreted, taken out of context and are open to abuse. Any sensitive, emotive or political content could damage reputation whether it was intentional or otherwise.
- 4.3** Employees should be particularly careful when completing their profiles or fields that include occupation, employer or work location. By completing these fields employees are providing a direct link between the individual and their employer. Any future inappropriate use, comment or material will be directly linked back to their employment and may weaken public confidence in both the employee and the council\* with serious consequences.
- 4.4** The use of social media sites for personal social interaction is not permitted during working hours.
- 4.5** Whilst Sandwell Council\* does not routinely review employees' personal comments on social media sites or personal accounts, the council\* does reserve the right to review these if matters relating to their content are raised

or of concern. This would include matters concerning potential abuse of sickness absence, illness and incapacity where it came to light that actions evidenced on an employee's personal site were contrary to what was being portrayed for employment purposes or were contrary to medical advice.

#### **4.7 When using social media personally:**

- do not use, share or encourage any offensive, defamatory, discriminatory, threatening, harassing, bullying, hateful, racist, sexist or other inappropriate comments released in a public statement or posted on any social network or blog.
- be mindful and respectful of what others may consider to be offensive, defamatory, discriminatory, threatening, harassing, bullying, hateful, racist, sexist or inappropriate
- never use social media to attack, abuse, or bully. Respect the privacy, feelings and reputation of others.
- never be derogatory to the council\*, its partners or service users or raise grievances via social media.
- ensure online activities do not interfere with their job, colleagues or council\* service users.
- never publish or disclose any information about the council\* which is not already in the public arena. Be mindful that whatever is published may be in the public arena for a long time and once posted or published there is less control over it.
- only use council\*- owned images or logos in a professional capacity.
- never report on conversations that are meant to be private, confidential or internal to the council\* or which conflict with the Data Protection Act 1998.
- do not cite or reference customers, partners or suppliers.
- maintain a professional relationship with the individuals they support (i.e. refrain from accepting service users or ex-service users as 'friends').
- be aware that negative posts about the council\* may promote a very negative image "I hate this place at the moment" is not a comment colleagues, service users, or suppliers want to read. It gives a very unprofessional view of the service provided.

### **5 Professional Use of Social Media**

- 5.1** Sandwell Council\* employees are encouraged, where relevant, to use social media via established council\* accounts, as means to inform the public and foster openness and engagement with local communities, as well as to promote council\* activities or inform the public of service disruptions.
- 5.2** Officers must at all times adhere to this policy and are reminded that action may be taken as a result of distasteful or offensive postings, slanderous or libellous posts or comments that are political in nature, or may damage the reputation of Sandwell Council\* or its employees.

- 5.3** In the run up to elections (purdah) councils have to be very careful not to do or say anything that could be seen to be supporting a political party or candidate. During this time council officers must not write political comments on council social media sites or make postings that could appear to be attempting to influence people's votes. The council reserves the right to remove or request the removal of any such postings by council employees.

Although it is permitted for council social media accounts to share social media updates/tweets from councillors, care should be taken during Purdah. Do not share or re tweet councillors during this period, other than in exceptional or emergency circumstances. Do not share photographs of councillors, other than the Mayor, during Purdah. During this period, social media should be closely monitored for political comments and they should be removed if necessary, with an explanation of why you have done so.

**5.4 When using social media:**

- ensure the communication has a purpose and benefit to Sandwell Council\*.
- do not share information you have learned in the course of your employment, this includes information about service users, even when anonymised.
- Always get permission before sharing someone's photograph on social media.
- ensure posts are civil, tasteful and relevant.
- never post anything which may be considered as unlawful, libellous or defamatory, threatening, harassing or abusive, racially offensive, harmful, obscene or of a sexual nature.
- posts must not contain swearing or language likely to offend.
- posts must not be repeat postings of images, messages or any that try to solicit money, harass in any way or attempt to install viruses onto people's computers and any other form of 'spamming'.
- never post material which promotes or might be interpreted as promoting, a political party or parties.
- posts must not contain content copied from elsewhere, as there may be copyright issues.
- posts must not publicise personal contact information or infringe upon personal privacy.
- care should be taken not to imply that Sandwell Council\* endorses a business. (Promotion of charitable and third sector organisations on council\* social media accounts is permitted.)
- posts must not impersonate another person or other organisation that Sandwell Council\* does not represent.
- photos used on networks such as, but not limited to, Outlook and Yammer should be appropriate and portray a professional image. The purpose of the picture is recognition, being able to 'put a face to a name' is becoming

more significant as employees, customers and partners are becoming more geographically dispersed. A 'night at the pub' or 'fun time on holiday' might be suitable for use on personal social media accounts but does not promote the right image on professional networks.

## **5.5 Reporting of Unacceptable Content**

If employees see any inappropriate content about Sandwell Council\*, its staff, partners or customers, or content that could bring the council\* in to disrepute, it is their duty, in the first instance, to bring this to the attention of their line manager/head teacher or contact Human Resources Front Line for further advice.

## **6 Trade Unions**

It is acknowledged that the recognised trade unions can use trade union social media without being subject to restrictions from the employer when carrying out their role as trade union officials.

## **7 Cyberbullying**

- 7.1** The council will, whenever possible, remove any inappropriate content from council administered social media.
- 7.2** If an employee becomes a victim of cyberbullying in relation to their employment they should bring this to the attention of their line manager/head teacher or contact Human Resources Front Line for further advice.
- 7.3** The council have designated Harassment Support Officers; the link below is a list of names and contact numbers:

[http://intranet.sandwell.gov.uk/downloads/file/3442/harassment\\_support\\_officers\\_contact\\_list-grievance-hr404](http://intranet.sandwell.gov.uk/downloads/file/3442/harassment_support_officers_contact_list-grievance-hr404)

## **8 Breaches of Policy**

- 8.1** Employees who fail to observe the standards of conduct set out in this policy may be subject to disciplinary action.

\* For school based staff please read 'school', 'school's', or 'the school' where appropriate.