Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Social media guidelines

Contents

Introduction

Social media can be used to reach new audiences. It offers an opportunity to have visible conversations online, making the communications process more transparent.

Social media isn't about replacing traditional media, it's about using new tools, together with existing methods, for communicating, networking, listening and analysing. It can be a fast and powerful way of distributing information and can expand the reach and impact of our messages.

Social media can be used to encourage people to talk about an issue, give us their views or take action. The benefits of using social media are that it allows us to:

1 listen and understand

- gain insight into our audiences' priorities and expectations
- keep up to date with the latest thinking

2 inform and explain

- make us more open and accessible to a wide range of people
- help position DCLG as a source of information and expertise
- promote the impact of our work and show where we have influenced change
- comment on projects as they progress
- link our work to the work of others
- gather support for our work
- communicate directly with our audiences rather than relying on coverage from traditional media

3 engage and mobilise

- engage with and influence the public and partner organisations
- build relationships with relevant audiences including influential people
- reach audiences who don't follow traditional media
- raise issues that we want more information, discussion and ideas around, particularly during policy making
- ask questions and get feedback
- promote events

Guidelines

Getting started

Before setting up your own blog, forum or other channel, it's a good idea to do some research to find out whether online communities around your topic already exist. It may be better to join existing conversations in the places where they're happening rather than starting new conversations and then having to bring people to them.

Even if you don't join in with online conversations, you should monitor social media to see what people are saying about issues relating to our policies and find out who the influential people are online.

There are many free tools that you can try out to find content relevant to your policy area. For example, Netvibes is a dashboard tool which allows you to continuously monitor conversations on the web around your chosen search term (you will need to register to use the site). Topsy and Addict-o-matic give you instant snapshots of conversations that are happening on the web now related to your search.

Tip: Don't forget to use quote marks when you're searching for particular words and you want the search to return results with those words appearing next to each other eg "social tenants". You might find you have to modify your search if it brings up irrelevant results. For example, a search for *"right to buy"* will bring up results such as 'Am I right to buy the latest iPhone?' A search for *"right to buy" housing* will filter our some of the irrelevant results.

Social media monitoring

The digital team can give you access to social media monitoring tools which can help you:

1 filter out irrelevant content
With 500 million tweets sent per day it can be hard to find what you're looking for. Our tools can help you find the right tweets, blogs, Facebook posts, online news sites and other content relevant to your policy area.

2 find popular online news content
The tools can show you which news stories people are talking about the most.

3 identify influential people
Find out who's talking about your policy area and if they're influential, for example if they have a large Twitter following, or if their blog gets a high number of views and comments. This will help you find people who can help share your messages.

4 get to know your audience
Get stats on who is talking about your policy, such as gender, profession and interests.

5 find popular websites
Identify the best websites, blogs and forums to share your content by seeing how many views per month each site gets and how much time visitors spend on the site.

6 evaluate
Measure the impact of your own activity by looking at the online response. For example, you will be able to see the number of online mentions of your policy area during a campaign or following a press notice.

Content

Social media content is usually concise. Some sites, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, have character limits so you have to keep your posts short.

Social media is useful for directing people to content elsewhere, for example on GOV. UK. It's also important to generate content exclusively for your social media channels to give people a reason to keep coming back.

You're competing for people's attention with lots of other content so visual posts such as photos, graphics and video are a good way of getting your content noticed. Lists are also a useful way of breaking content down into bite-sized chunks.

The more useful your content is the more successful it's likely to be. For example, case studies work well on traditional media but on social media people don't just want to hear what someone did, but how they did it. Rather than just telling an interesting story, turn your content into a list of useful tips that people in the same situation can use.

Think about how to engage people – ask questions, encourage comments, ask them to share their images – and engage with other people's content by retweeting, sharing posts, commenting and writing guest blog posts.

Social media dos and don'ts

DO...

- remember you can have separate accounts for work and personal use. Some people feel comfortable using one account for both work-related and personal use. You may prefer to set up one account for work using your DCLG email address and another using a private email address for use outside work

- think about what you want to achieve. This will help you choose the right platform. Do you want to:
  - signpost information elsewhere?
  - start a discussion?
  - engage people who wouldn't normally be involved in policy making?
  - achieve transparency?

  Twitter, for example, is a good place to have an open conversation. Tweets are public and anyone can 'follow' you. If you want to have a more structured conversation with targeted people you might want to consider a closed forum, such as an invitation-only LinkedIn group

- practise. Start by listening and tracking conversations. Think about what you would say if you were part of that conversation. Practise offline with colleagues until you're confident about joining in online

- double check that you are not disclosing any confidential information

- bear in mind that content on social media may generate media coverage. If a journalist contacts you, refer them to the press office

- be clear about whether something is your own personal opinion or DCLG's official position

- respond to comments. Focus on the constructive by recognising intelligent contributions

- identify your role and position in the Department

- remember to refer to other channels in related press notices and publications, to generate discussion on the topic and build an audience

- anticipate the risks of using social media. These could include:
  - increase in workload. Monitoring social media and responding to comments takes time, but it can also save time. Social media allows us to quickly communicate one-to-many, rather than having to repeatedly communicate one-to-one
  - negative comments. Think about what people might say in advance and have your responses ready. Negative comments are likely to appear on social media whether we are part of the conversation or not. At least if we are there we can limit the damage by addressing them, having our say and correcting inaccurate information
  - misinterpretation. Get someone in your team or in communications to read your content before you submit it to make sure it's clear

- be aware of the risks online, including hacking and identity theft. Visit Get Safe Online for advice on how to protect yourself

DON'T...

- be too formal. Write how you speak. Use short words, sentences and paragraphs. Keep it chatty and conversational

- reveal too much personal information about yourself, eg your personal contact details or where you live

- say anything on social media that you wouldn't say in other types of communication. Although your tone can be less formal, it's important to exercise the same caution and professionalism you would use when writing a letter or email. The core values of the Civil Service code – integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality – apply here, as they would in any other situation. Avoid:

    - political content
    - commenting on controversial issues in ways that are inconsistent with Department policy
    - personal attacks

- blur fact and opinion. Consider carefully how your words could be (mis)interpreted or (mis)represented

- try to respond to everything. If you are attracting a large number of comments and questions look for themes and address these together in one response

- be afraid to say 'I'll get back to you' if you can't respond straight away

- respond to abusive comments. Focus on correcting factually inaccurate information

- start something you can't maintain. Think carefully about resources before you start. Social media can be a quick and convenient method of getting information out but you need to spend time planning and thinking about how and when you're going use it and how much time you will need to commit to responding to comments

DCLG social media channels

Twitter

Twitter is for sending short updates of up to 140 characters. These are called 'Tweets'. Twitter is one of the top 10 most visited sites on the internet and has 15 million users in the UK. Users send tweets to their followers. Twitter users can comment on tweets by replying to them, and share other people's tweets with their own followers by retweeting. You can also send direct messages to individual users as long as you are following each other.

Monitoring Twitter can be useful for gauging sentiment towards a particular issue, which can help us anticipate and plan for public and media reactions. Twitter is useful for finding out information as it happens and is often the first place where information is shared, even before it appears in the media. Even if you're not tweeting, you might find it helpful to have a Twitter account so you can follow other people's tweets and conversations.

DCLG on Twitter

We use Twitter to:
- engage with our audiences
- reach those who might not look at our press notices and website
- draw attention to press notices and information on our website
- promote our campaigns
- rebut factually inaccurate information
- tell people what's going on live during events and speeches, and communicate information in real time as events unfold
- monitor conversations relevant to our policy areas
- keep up to date with what our partner organisations are doing

How to build your Twitter followers

- It's important to have a profile picture and a bio that explains what your interests are on Twitter so that people with similar interests can follow you. You could include a link to your policy page on GOV.UK
- Stay on topic. It's fine to send more light-hearted tweets occasionally to add a more personal touch but generally you should stick to tweets that are relevant to your policy area
- Follow other people who are tweeting about subjects relevant to your policy area and retweet regularly. This will encourage other people to retweet you, and your tweets will reach a wider audience
- Tag people by using their @username. They're more likely to retweet your tweet and/or reply
- Find relevant hashtags that are already being used rather than starting your own.
- Put your Twitter username on your email signature and on documents, particularly at events

Twitter dos and don'ts

DO...

- keep it short: you only have 140 characters to work with (including spaces, punctuation and links)
- use links: Part of the value of Twitter is signposting more detailed information elsewhere. Most of our Tweets will include a link to information on our other channels. Use a link shortener such as Bitly to shorten URLs and track clicks
- use hashtags so that people can easily search for and categorise your tweets

- put some thought into the name of your project or campaign (Will it work as a Twitter hashtag? Will it fit into a tweet?)
- retweet: Twitter is based on reciprocity – the more you retweet other people's tweets, use @replies and mentions, and favourite other people's tweets, the more people will do the same for you. These activities send a notification to the other account holder, drawing their attention to your activity on Twitter, and could mean that your tweets will reach a wider audience
- make use of Twitter lists to segment your audience and keep track of stakeholders. Lists can be used to filter your timeline and so are useful for monitoring what your audiences are saying
- generate content exclusively for Twitter. Twitter can be useful for drawing attention to content elsewhere but you shouldn't only use it for this. You could include tweets for:
  - interesting facts
  - events that you are holding or attending
  - asking and responding to questions
  - highlighting relevant content from other organisations
- remember that tweets are public. Anyone can see them, not just your followers. If you want to say something privately, send a direct message
- use tools like Hootsuite for monitoring Twitter. This free tool helps you keep track of tweets, hashtags and keywords

- keep an eye on trends. These are the most popular topics being discussed on Twitter, listed on the left of your home page. Look for trending hashtags which you can use. Trendsmap is useful for seeing which words and people are trending locally
- decide whether you need to correct a mistake or whether it's best not to draw attention to it. If you decide the mistake is serious enough, apologise and/or delete the tweet as quickly as possible

DON'T...

- tweet anything you wouldn't say to someone's face
- just broadcast – engage: Twitter is a conversation, and while we can't respond to all comments, we should get back to people where we can. Reply to common questions or to questions which would interest a wider audience
- overuse hashtags. Limit it to two per tweet otherwise your tweet could be difficult to read. It's good practice to use a hashtag as part of a sentence. If you want to use a second hashtag put it at the end of your tweet, eg:

  'Troubled families shows how central & #LocalGov can work together, says @LondonCouncils report goo.gl/R6z6Tj #BetterServices'
- put up with abuse. Block the offender

Guide to live tweeting

If you're going to an event which you think may be of interest to your followers, and the content isn't sensitive or confidential, consider tweeting live.

1   Find out, or decide on, the hashtag in advance.

2   If possible, draft some tweets in advance. (If you have the Twitter app on your phone you can type your tweet and click 'cancel'. You will have the option to save your tweet to 'drafts'.) Try and get hold of a copy of the speech/presentation etc before the event.

3   Think about who your audience is and make sure your tweets and comments are relevant to them.

4   Find out the speaker's Twitter username in advance so you can attribute their comment to them using their @username.

5   You can link back to previous tweets if you want to comment again later on in the event. Find your tweet and click on the time/date on the right hand side. This will open the tweet in a new window. Copy and paste the URL into a link shortener, eg Bitly, and include it in your new tweet.

6   Use images and video.

7   Look out for comments on your tweets and reply to them.

8   Let your followers know in advance you will be live tweeting. Give them the date, time and hashtag for the event.

Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site with a billion users worldwide. It's the second most visited website in the world after Google. Half of UK adults have a Facebook account. The most popular brands and pages on Facebook tend to be the fun ones, so Facebook may not be the best place for more serious discussions. However, the majority of Facebook users are 25–34 so it could be useful for reaching this demographic.

DCLG uses Facebook to raise awareness of campaigns such as Right to Buy and Fire Kills.

Flickr

DCLG's Flickr photostream hosts all our images from ministers' visits and events. These images are available for anyone to download. Images on Flickr can be embedded onto websites, blogs and other social media as a slide show.

YouTube

YouTube is a website for watching and sharing videos. YouTube is the third biggest website in the world and the second most popular search engine after Google.

DCLG's YouTube channel is where we put interviews with ministers and campaign videos. Video can be a great way of delivering information in an accessible way, summarising complicated policies and increasing the impact of a message.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a rapidly growing site for sharing images and video. Users create 'boards' around a particular theme or topic and 'pin' content from the web onto them. The advantage of Pinterest over Flickr is that our own content can be mixed with content from other organisations' websites. Pins can be posted to other social networking sites, eg Facebook and Twitter.

Pinterest can be useful for publicising campaigns. All campaign images and posters can be displayed in one place with descriptions and links below the images. Pinterest can be used to share short case studies and you can also display your pins on a map.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a business networking site. Gone are the days when people only used LinkedIn to find a job. It's estimated that over 60% of traffic to corporate websites from social media sites is from LinkedIn. LinkedIn groups can be a good place for intelligent debate on current topics. For example there is a LinkedIn group for neighbourhood planning (you must have a LinkedIn account to join this group). DCLG policy staff have joined in the discussion to help establish themselves as the experts on neighbourhood planning. LinkedIn groups can be closed – users have to request to join the group – and so can be a good place to target people you know will have an interest in a particular topic. Because of the professional nature of the site, LinkedIn doesn't attract internet trolls so you are more likely to generate a productive discussion.

Storify

Storify allows you to curate different social media, including tweets, images and links, to tell a story. Posts are displayed in date order and you can keep updating your stories as events unfold. We use Storify to document events and visits.

Animated maps

Mapping sites like Tripline and Google Maps can be a good way of showing the geographical spread of our projects and presenting our work in a lively way combining text, images and video. Tripline users can add images and information about their journeys and post them to other social media. Viewers can 'follow' maps and add comments.

audioBoom

audioBooms are short sound files, ideal for interviews and announcements. They're easy to create but difficult to edit so make sure your interviewee knows what they want to say in advance. You can include images and descriptions with your audioBooms.

DCLG is also trialling Vine for short videos and thinglink for interactive images.

Blogs

Blogs are now an established channel for news and discussion, and for communicating ideas to the public and partner organisations. Blogs create an 'always-on' platform for engagement and integrate well with other social media activity. For example, on a WordPress blog you can show a Twitter feed, and embed Flickr images and YouTube videos.

Before deciding to set up your own blog, consider whether a guest post on someone else's blog might be a better option. Why not start by blogging on DCLG's internal intranet?

Types of blog post

There are lots of different types of blog post. Here are a few:

- Thinking aloud: take a half-developed thought and invite comment
- Thought piece/essay: write a developed argument, and show how you got there
- Response to events/breaking news: your take on current issues
- Comment follow-up: respond at length to a comment on one of your earlier posts
- Event follow-up: reflect on an event
- Link post: signpost something interesting seen elsewhere
- Photo post: a photo of an event you've been to, with a few lines on why it was useful
- Video post: a short video or interview
- Metaphor: connect two separate ideas to promote new ways of looking at an issue
- Case study: something you've seen/been involved in that has learnings for your readers

- Insights: a short post about something that has inspired some new thinking
- Themes/trends: summarise things you're hearing consistently from different sources
- Guest post: invite a guest post from a relevant thinker, colleague, peer, etc

How to write

Once you've decide what to write about, here are some tips for how to write a blog post:

- Write how you speak: use short words, sentences and paragraphs. Keep it chatty and conversational. Try reading what you've written out loud
- Keep it short: most entries should be 200 to 300 words. If your post is longer, break it up with subheadings
- Use lots of links: link at every opportunity to relevant publications and web pages. Include links to external sites, especially other blogs and articles
- Invite comment: actively encourage comments. The success of your blog will depend largely on the openness of your writing. Make sure you have a direct question at the end: What do you think? Am I right? What did I miss? Do you agree? How can I…?
- Use short, enticing headlines: unlike news headlines they don't need tell the whole story. They can be intriguing or playful, or contain a pun
- Show personality: write from your own perspective and include references to your wider interests – personal as well as professional
- Add media: enrich your posts with photos, videos and embedded slideshows

- **Add tags and categories**: for every post you have the option of assigning tags or categories, or both. Tags are keywords you can assign to each post which are displayed alongside your blog. Categories are displayed as simple list. You can add each post to as many categories as you want, and add new categories as you go along. Using both is recommended so readers can easily find your content

Things to remember

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Keep it respectful. Exercise caution with regard to exaggeration, colourful language, guesswork, derogatory remarks or characterisations
- Make sure your manager is aware that you're blogging to avoid any surprises
- If you quote other sources include a link to that source
- Respond to comments
- Be careful about blurring fact and opinion and consider carefully how your words could be (mis)interpreted
- Encourage readers to contribute perspective, additional knowledge and expertise
- Be the first to correct your own mistakes, and don't alter previous posts without indicating that you have done so
- It's fine to show a bit of personality in your blog entry but be careful of revealing too much personal information about yourself
- Get your facts straight and provide context to your argument, eg explain how you came to a particular conclusion
- Link to other sources if you're quoting them
- Don't worry if you don't get any comments at first. It takes time to build your online reputation and you may not generate comments at first. Remember that the majority of people using social media watch and listen rather than joining in so no comments doesn't necessarily mean that no one is paying attention

Evaluation

It's important to keep track of how effective your social media communications are so that you can evaluate what has worked well and what has been less successful. Social media sites will often give you basic stats. For example, Twitter tells you how many people are following you, and helps you keep track of the number of retweets and mentions you've had (in the notifications section). For more detailed information about your online engagement try the following tools (they're free and you don't need to register):

Klout gives you a score out of 100 for your online reputation. It measures things like @mentions, retweets, comments and 'likes'. The focus is on engagement and on who is doing that engagement, ie whether you're being retweeted by industry leaders or individuals

socialmention is useful for monitoring what's being said about an organisation or a topic online, and can estimate the number of positive and negative mentions.

Topsy social analytics can be used to track the number of mentions before, during and after a campaign to see how social media activity affects the level of online engagement.

Contact the digital team for access to more in-depth social media analytics tools.

Glossary

@ (Twitter)
Twitter usernames are prefaced by the @ symbol, eg @CommunitiesUK. A mention is a tweet using someone's @username. An @reply is a tweet posted by clicking the reply button on a Tweet.

Block (Twitter)
You can block abusive or offensive Twitter users by clicking on the cog icon on their profile page and selecting 'Block'. Blocked users can't follow you. They will not receive notification that they've been blocked.

Blog
(Short for web log) A website used for short, regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events or other material such as images or videos. Most blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments.

Experts (Topsy)
Users who often mention your search topic who Topsy classes as influential because they are regularly retweeted.

Favourite (Twitter)
Click the small star icon under a Tweet to let the tweeter know that you liked their Tweet. The tweet will be saved in your favourites list. Your favourites list is public.

Hashtags (Twitter)
Hashtags are created by prefacing keywords with a # symbol. This turns the word into a link which users can click on to find other tweets using the same hashtag. Hashtags don't contain spaces or punctuation eg #housing, #RightToBuy.

Internet trolls
People who seek out places to post abusive or off-topic comments.

List (Twitter)
A group of Twitter users. You can create your own lists or subscribe to lists created by others. Viewing a list timeline will show you a stream of tweets from only the users on that list.

Retweet (Twitter)
Re-posting of someone else's tweet.

Timeline (Twitter)
Your Twitter home page showing all tweets from those you have chosen to follow.
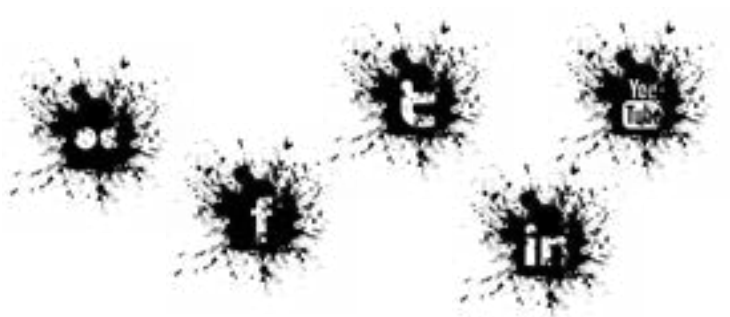
Tweets (Twitter)
Short messages, known as status updates. These are no longer than 140 characters including spaces, punctuation and links.

Bio (Twitter)
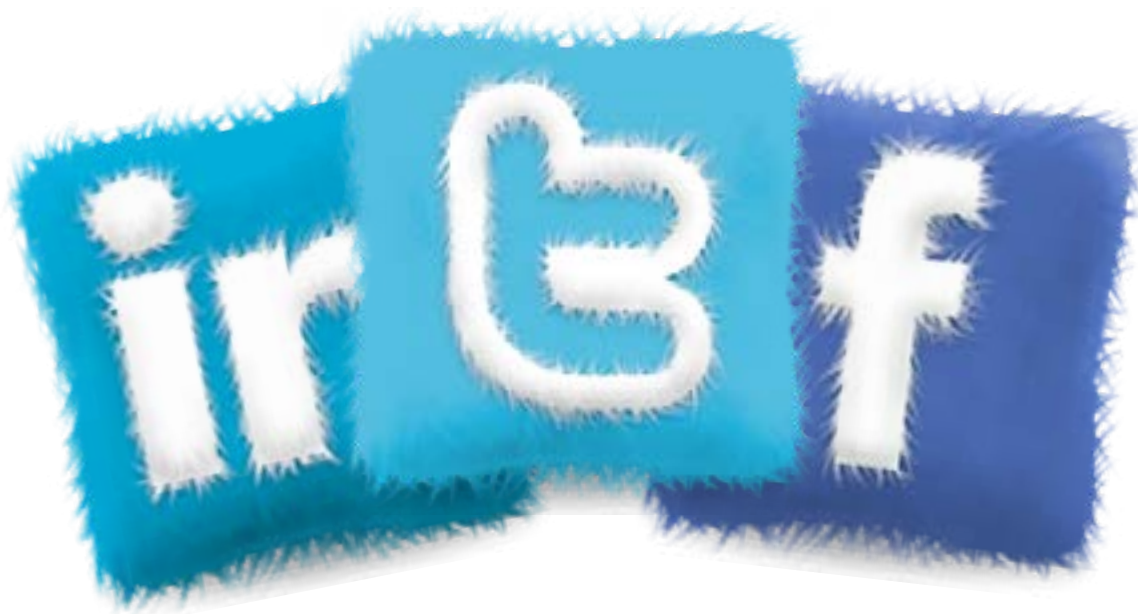A biography of 160 characters or less, which appears at the top of your Twitter profile.

Followers (Twitter)
People who chose to see your tweets in their Twitter home page feed by 'following' you.

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Some social media tools and websites may be restricted on Connect PCs.

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